

THE MOSTEST METAL DUDE IRON PRINCELIEST OF PRINCES

(Aka: Stormweaver III)

PROLOGUE

Early January, 2469

Sol System – Venus – Sector 1

Khalanasy Vallis Resort

“Arrogance is a poison in the vines of this family. Its grip is so vile that there are times I find myself wishing the money didn’t exist, that the company didn’t exist. Even before I was a father I prayed to gods most of the rest of mankind has long since stopped believing in for the strength to keep it from taking hold of me or my future children.

...There is nothing more painful now than reflecting on how thoroughly I have failed in that endeavor...”

-Doctor Kamiya Hiroto,

Private Journals

Bliss was a private resort suite with a view of the wilds of Venus, Kamiya Keiji had long since decided.

To be fair, anyone with the fortune of experiencing the sight before him now would have agreed that there wasn't much that could compare. Due to the unique composition of its atmosphere and soil, even after its terraforming some 2 or 3 centuries before Venus was a world of color and life unlike any other in the ISCM, within the Sol System and beyond alike. Whereas most planets humanity had taken hold of had been transformed to match in some close proximity to the lush greenery of Earth, Venus was a place of brilliant pinks and bright reds and oranges. The trees—monolithic, 100-story beasts that had never seen a cutting since their planting—swayed far below where Keiji stood before the clear smart-glass window of his and Samantha's corner room, an undulating ocean of strangely-colored forest that seemed to breath with the planet. In the distance, a line of vibrant blue so artificial it was magnificent indicated the pristine edge of one of the planet's many man-made oceans, and the sky above reflected the distant sun in a wash of gold clouds shadowed with black where the boiling churn was thickest.

Keiji could have stood at that window for hours taking in the sight. He had stood at that window for hours, in fact. It had been under the influence of a multitude of the various hallucinogenics and stimulants that were the heart of a healthy silent market in and around the Venusian resorts, sure, but even without the drugs he suspected the view would have been enough to keep him enamored for as long as the day was bright.

Unfortunately... that experience would have to wait.

Maybe next time, Keiji thought with a smirk, turning away from the woods of Venus to make for the room's massive bed, upon whose stark white linens one of the two private maids their accommodations included had already laid several potential outfits for his and Samantha's evening plans.

It was their last night planetside. Not because they wanted to leave, of course. In years past the pair of them would have booked the suite indefinitely, heading home—or to whatever next destination fit their fancy—at their leisure. Infuriatingly, however, Keiji’s father had very recently become something of a significant pain in the ass, and had made it clear that morning that if the two of them weren’t back in Tokyo by evening the next day there would be hell to pay. Given the old man turning a blind eye to their indulgences was regrettably essential for the two of them to enjoy their stylized lifestyle, Keiji and Samantha had begrudgingly assured Abigail Smith—the family steward—they would be there, though not before setting themselves up for one more night of gratification. First would be dinner in one of the private rooms at The Valley, Khalanasy Vallis’ best restaurant where even a member of the Kamiya family had to well-grease the right hands to get in last minute. After that there were still several clubs in the south tower the pair of them hadn't yet had a chance to visit, a fact they planned to change before the evening was over. Finally—assuming they were still functional by the time the next morning—there was sunrise party in one of the permanent penthouse suites Samantha had gotten them invitations too. Keiji had no idea whose home it was—nor, he suspected, did his wife—but it hardly mattered. They were on the list.

And being on the list was one of the few things Keiji had really ever cared about.

The blue one, he decided, bending to pluck the silky suit from the bed and holding it up to examine further. Satisfied, he pulled up his NOED and turned to face the window again, inputting eye commands even as he held up the jacket and pants. In a blink the sight of Venus in all its colorful glory vanished, replaced by a perfect reflection of the crisp white room. Keiji took a moment—as he often tended to—to appraise himself, smiling into the mirror. He might not have been a User like his father, but even despite that and being 45 years old, he didn’t think anyone would scoff at the frame he cut. He was tall and fit, with jet-black hair that wouldn’t fade for some decades yet if the family doctors could help it, and his slate-grey eyes—identical to every born

member of the Kamiya family lineage—were as piercing as they'd ever been. Even if his father had never done much of anything else for him all his life, at the very least Keiji could thank the old bastard for his handsome frame and—

CRASH!

Keiji jumped at the sudden sound of what could only be glass shattering in the hall outside, nearly dropping his suit to the polished marble floor. Before he could begin to wonder what the hell was going on, though, there came the muted sounds of a woman yelling and the rushed clack-clack of heels on stone. At once Keiji suspected who it was, and he frowned. For someone to be so loud they could be heard through the subtle muffling tech built into the resort walls...

His suspicion was confirmed not 5 seconds later when the suite door flew open with a bang outside in the living area.

“KEIJI!” Samantha was howling, obviously furious. “KEIJI!”

Tossing the suit back on the bed, Keiji hurried to bedroom door.

“I'm in here. What's wrong?”

Samantha was a sight, even angry as she looked. Then again, she was angry often enough for him to be used to it. She was of Old American decent, with light skin that held the hint of a handsome tan year-round, and long, red-pink hair that was currently wound in a pretty bun atop her head. Her eyes too, were pink, but specked with shattered black that had always made Keiji think of a neon universe.

Right now, though, those eyes were ablaze with a fire that would have burned out any stars he'd ever saw in them.

“Keiji, she put in for a transfer!” Samantha continued to yell as she stalked towards him, her green-blue dress hitched up with one hand up above her black heels so as not to trip on the hem. “A transfer!”

Keiji blinked at this, not understanding a word.

“She...? What? A transfer...?” he repeated, trying and failing to follow. “What are you talking about? I thought you said you were headed to the restaurant early to grab a drink with Aarna and that new guy she met at the pool the other—”

“Are you not listening?!” Samantha interrupted him with a shriek, looking positively demented. “She put in for a transfer! You think I was going to sit around for some shitty cocktail after that?!”

“Samantha,” Keiji growled, starting to get irritated himself now and stepping fully out of the room to face his wife. “You aren’t make any sense. Who put in for a transfer? What are you talking about?”

Samantha swelled with irritation, looking all the more livid that he wasn’t following her poor explanation.

“Sarah!” she hissed back. “Your daughter! Sarah. Has. Put In. For. A. TRANSFER!”

Finally Keiji froze, understanding at last. For a long moment he gaped at his wife, having trouble registering what she’d said despite her poignant spelling out of the situation.

“I’m sorry,” he snarled at last, feeling his anger spike. “She what?!”

CHAPTER 1

PLACEHOLDER

-PLACHOLDER

“GAAAH!!”

Valera Dent’s rise from sleep was violent and cold, as it had been so often for too long. Even as she came to she wrenched herself up and away, scrambling with all speed from her bed and its entrapping covers. In a fraction of a heartbeat she found the wall, then the corner of the room she deliberately kept clear of any obstacle. At once the motion-sensor setting she’d set for herself triggered, and the hefty band of smart-glass that encircled the entirety of the room began to lighten slowly, rising from being blacked out for sleep to a dim, cheerful hue of brightening yellow and blue.

It didn’t help. Not for a solid minute, at least.

And that was more than enough time for Valera to relive the moment, relive the nightmare, trembling and pressed into the corner as tightly as she could, eyes wide and unseeing under the loose curtain of short-cropped brown hair that had fallen in front of her face in her mad scramble.

The figure. The flash. The pain. The figure. The flash. Her teammates, dead. The pain. The figure. All of them, dead. The flash. The pain.

And then the outline of a shapeless limb reaching towards her, seeking her, and the two words that echoed like a silent malediction through Valera’s mind as she felt formless, cold metal smother the shattered, bloody mess that was all that was left of her face.

Those words. Those words...

“Guuuh!”

The breath came all at once, held unknowing in her chest from the moment Valera had awoken. With it, mercifully, came clarity, and with the brightening of the lights she drew back to herself, drew back from the horror and agony and the blurry, broken shapes of her squad scattered around that cursed cave. She heaved in another gasp of air, then another, until her shaking had steadied to an uneven shiver and she was back, back in her room, back to blinking around at the corners and shadows for ever-absent sign of that horrible outline.

You're alright, Valera. You're alright.

Valera started as the words popped across her NOED in bright blue. It took her a moment to read them, took her a moment to process them. When she did, though, she breathed easier, relaxing ever so slightly. It helped, not being alone.

And in her own unique way, Valera was never, ever alone.

"I'm alright," she repeated. "I'm alright... Yeah..."

She stayed crouched like that for some time yet, though, and Kes let her be. In fact, the text didn't intrude again until Valera had shakily started to get to her feet at last, still unable to stop herself from scanning the room as she did.

They seem worse than ever. I'm sorry.

"S'ok..." Valera muttered back, trying to focus more and remember that she was alright. She was. "They were getting better for a while. I'll get back to that."

Kes didn't answer. She didn't need to. Yes, the nightmares had been worse over the last week, but neither of them needed to voice what the trigger had been. They knew. Of course they knew.

There were probably a lot of people amongst those who'd been present at the Sector 9 Sectionals tournament the week before where having trouble sleeping, these days...

At last Valera truly started to feel herself again, and she finally took her hand away from the wall to move shakily and retrieve her covers from where here flailing had kicked them off to the far side of the room. Tossing them back over the mattress, she stood for a moment looking down at the bed, hands still trembling slightly, a dangerous unease tight in her gut.

Dr. Forester's words of encouragement were in her ears as she eventually crawled back in and slipped under the blankets, telling her avoiding the act would only be harder in the end.

For a long time Valera lay like that in the quiet of her room, staring unblinkingly at the ceiling, unwilling for a while yet to dim the lights again. She was safe, she had to tell her self. She was safe. She was in her quarters in the staff housing of the Galens Institute. Nothing could reach her here. Nothing.

At least not yet.

Valera took another deep breath at that, shoving the fearful thought away. Unwillingly she closed her eyes at last, and behind her lids put the commands into her NOED to turn the lights off. At once the glow she could still see faded, and she was left in the dark, forcing herself all the while to remember that was was alright. That she was safe.

It took her nearly an hour to start to doze off again, and unfortunately it was in those lingering moments as she'd just begun to fall away that her frame came to life all its own once more.

And it wasn't Kes this time...

Valera sat bolt upright again, alarmed and alert. Like most sane individuals she had settings to prevent herself from being disturbed at night. To overrule them, one had to

ring her three times in succession, and most everyone understand that such interruptions should only be kept for extreme emergencies.

So when she saw who it was that was calling, she didn't hesitate to pick up.

“Maddie? Is everything okay?”

The quick, worried tone Maddison Kent answered with had the hair on Valera's arms standing on end in an instant. She listened for a few seconds, a weight like solid lead forming in her throat.

Then Valera Dent, S-Ranked Knight Class User and Chief Combat Instructor at the Galens Institute, was tearing from her quarters with all haste, grabbing whatever clothes she had on hand and cursing the MIND as she ran.

CHAPTER 2

PLACEHOLDER

-PLACHOLDER

In the middle of Castalon, there was never a true night. Not even in winter. Yes, the sun set—just like on every one of the 42 worlds the Intersystem Collective had terraformed across its 7 claimed solar systems—and yes, global rotation had been incrementally adjusted over decades so that Astra-3 spun in a 24-hour cycle to emulate the turn of Earth in Sol. Theoretically, that should have provided at least a handful of hours of darkness every day.

But in the middle of Castalon, there was never a true night.

For what might have been 5 minutes or 2 hours, Reidon Ward stood under the eaves of the great tree that was the centerpiece of Kanés' open courtyard. Through the unshifting leaves of the red-orange branches he watched—entirely without seeing—the passing lights of the flyers and transports that made up the traffic of the skylines high above him, dense even though it had to be past midnight. Some part of Rei knew he was cold, too. The space was open to the January night three stories above him, the chill of the season trapped in by the intangible barriers that kept the lobby floor of the first-year dorm warm despite a total lack of walls or doors between the red-carpeted sitting area and the stone floor of the courtyard. It didn't help that he was barefoot, either, nor that he'd left his military-issue jacket upstairs, having decided instead to leave his room wearing nothing but his black slacks and an unbuttoned shirt. Not that it mattered.

Rei couldn't feel anything but heat, in the moment.

“Dammit,” he growled through clenched teeth at the sky, not for the first time in however long he'd been standing there. Above him, several of the pink and blue

spotlights from Castalon's unseen skyscrapers swung a broken pattern across the sky through the leaves. He didn't see that either, though, just like he didn't see the other pulsing lights of the city, nor hear the bustle and noise of the nightlife that could usually just be made out even from the very center of the Galens Institute. Rei was gone, taken away by an emotion he was proud to say—or at least proud to think—he very rarely lost himself to.

Anger.

“Dammit,” he repeated, more forcefully this time, and at last he turned from the city glow and his misting breath to make his way out of the courtyard. The warmth of the building proper did nothing to soothe his irritation as he stepped back into the lobby, unfortunately, nor did the dim ceiling lights that brightened automatically for him at his reentrance. Nothing much in the world could have helped, in that moment, to be fair. Maybe punching something, sure, but as of a week before Rei was on the cusp of becoming a B-Ranked CAD User. Even if his specs were still on average skewed a ways lower than that—closer to C5 or 6 probably—he knew there wasn't a single piece of furniture in the room that would have survived his abuse. Maybe the nearest of the square, polished columns might have made a better target of his ire, but Rei was pretty confident even the clean cement couldn't wether a hit from him unscathed anymore, unless he dialed back his Strength spec.

And Rei had zero desire to dial back his Strength spec, in the moment.

He'd done it. He'd actually done it. The one lever he would have liked not to pull, never to pull. It wasn't like he'd had much of a choice, to be fair, but that hadn't made the decision any simpler, nor the following fire easier to swallow. Rei wasn't stupid, either—far from, in fact. He knew it was the right call, or at least knew it was the only call.

And he still hated that he'd done it.

“DAMN. IT!” he snapped at the air as loudly as he dared, dropping down onto one of the the lobby’s couches without thinking to lean over his lap and ball his fists against his temples.

The Kamiya Corporation’s offer of sponsorship was... extensively in his favor. He was aware of that. Even after he’d rejected their million-credit-a-year stipend provision, and even after he’d insisted that the company would be backing all six members of Firesong instead of just him. Even after that, the offer was extensively in his favor. It was why he’d accepted it, why he’d called Ueno Jasper and told her he would be taking Kamiya up on the deal.

But that didn’t mean there wasn’t a cost.

Rei ground his teeth, trying and failing not to regret having signed the paperwork as soon as Jasper had provided him the modified documentation. The changes had been made, as requested. The guarantees were there. Only the meeting he’d been promised hadn’t been put into writing, but Rei had taken the woman at her word that he would get it. He felt—for some odd reason—the fixer could be trusted, even if he rather suspected there was a good chance that was just a feeling she had a talent for cultivating. But even if that fell through, the really important parts had been in ink, and would take effect the following Monday, in just over a week. Rei didn’t know yet how it would happen, but he and Firesong had been promised trainers of a particular caliber, and that was all that mattered to him. Between them and the extra sessions Galens was already providing with Michael Bretz, Claire de Soto, and Catori Imala—the first year Brawler, Saber, and Phalanx sub-instructors respectively—Rei was feeling much more sure that he and the others would meet the expectations Central Command had so theatrically laid out for the squad. Maybe even surpass them if they could. Yes, he still hated that he’d done it, even if it had been the right choice. It had to have been the right choice.

... Right?

“Dammit...” Rei muttered one last time, then he brought himself up to lean back against the couch, sliding down into it with his hands in his lap now, head resting against the top of the cushions. The cement ceiling of the lobby was a few shades darker than the walls, and Rei let his thoughts get lost in the near-black for a minute or two, let himself feel the anger, the disappointment, the bitterness. He let himself burn, let himself want to scream and curse and punch something again. He couldn’t let it all out in the moment maybe, but morning would come eventually, and with the squad’s early training hours would come an outlet. So for the time being, just letting himself feel was enough.

After a while, Rei started to calm down, and with another sigh he sat up straight again.

“Sorry, man,” he muttered aloud, thinking of what his friend Catcher’s take would probably be on the evening’s development once there was the chance to share. “Not so sure about that promise not to become the evil emperor of the universe any m—”

But then Rei went stiff, his episode of self-berating interrupted as his NOED came alive of its own volition in his eyes, a wash of blue text suddenly threading itself down across his vision.

...

ALERT: New link established.

Processing networked information.

...

Calculating.

...

Results:

Singular link capacity has reached 100%.

Combat Assistance Device 'Shido' max link capacity has reached 62%.

...

Checking networked data acquisition.

...

Adequate data acquirement met.

Device initiating link manifestation.

...

Processing.

...

Manifestation complete.

Singular link has been designated as "Shard 1"

Shard 1: ACTIVATED

Shard 1: ASSIGNED

...

Display Device Links?

YES/NO

"What the hell?" Rei breathed, so taken aback he hadn't even noticed he'd jolted to his feet to stand rigidly on the red carpet even as he'd processed the very first lines. He read the full alert once, then twice, but only after the third review was he 100% sure he couldn't make heads or tails of the information laid out before him. 'New link established?' 'Shard 1'? What did any of that even mean?? And what the hell was this about Shido's 'max link capacity'?? Strange enough that Rei didn't have clue what that could be, but even more so that it apparently was at the seemingly-random point of being at '62%' of its potential? Rei couldn't help but read everything a fourth time, but when this again provided no additional clues he made the choice to hover over the 'Display Device Link?' question and select 'YES'.

And then he went cold.

Device Link Request acknowledged.

...

Device Link Assignments:

SHARD 1: Gemela

...

“Viv,” Rei got out hoarsely, stunned only for the breath it took for him to read the name of the CAD.

Then his call log was up, and he was ringing ‘Viviana Arada’, heedless of the lateness of the hours.

“Come on,” he hissed as the line rang once, then twice. “Come on, Viv.”

Nothing though, so he tried again, then again, then again. With each failed attempt to contact his best friend, a weight developed in Rei’s gut, getting heavier and heavy.

A bad feeling. He had a very bad feeling...

After the fourth call didn’t get through, Rei was off, tearing from the spot in the lobby so quickly he thought he felt the carpet tear under his bare feet.

It had fallen into place mostly as he’d tried to reach her, but the conviction solidified in the mere seconds it took him to bolt from the bottom floor of the dorm all the way up the stairs to the third, his Speed spec unleashed to the highest capacity Rei could pull from it without outright calling on Shido. ‘Singular link’, the alert had said. Stupid. Stupid of him not to make the connection. Hadn’t he and Aria been muttering for weeks now about how Shido seemed to be affecting the Devices around it? Hadn’t they been alarmed by Catcher and Chancery’s acquisitions of Ruinous and Warband—incredibly rare Abilities—and then Aria’s own jaw-dropping evolution at the end of Sectionals not a week prior? Stupid. So stupid of him not to have made the connection immediately, to have realized what it was. He and Aria had even said—

sometimes joking, sometimes not—on more than one occasion that Viv would be the decided factor, that Viv would be the defining variable. Viv, who had been around Rei and Shido the longest. Viv, who had trained with him for months before any of the others had entered the fold.

And now something had happened. Something had happened to seemingly manifest the very thing Rei and Aria had been suspicious of, something big enough to give Shido cause to produce an alert of the change for the very first time, the likes of which Rei had never seen before. “Singular link capacity has reached 100%,” the notification had said...

A bad feeling. A very, very bad feeling...

Rei reached 304 inside of 10 seconds, crashing through the door so violently it hit the wall of the suite’s short entry hallway with a trembling BANG. He didn’t even notice, just as he didn’t notice when he did the same thing tearing into his own room, jolting A half-dressed Aria out of bed with a yell so that she looked around in alarm, frazzled and blinking rapidly.

“Rei??” she demanded once she seemed to realize she wasn’t under attack, reaching up to push her red hair out of her eyes. “Wha—? Wait, what time is it? What are you—?” But then she must have caught the look on his face as Rei scrambled around his room for his jacket and boots, and her demeanor changed in flash. “What happened? What’s going on?”

Rei considered for a moment not telling her, considered for a moment that there wasn’t the time. Something had happened, something bad. He was sure of it. The more he thought about it, the more he was sure of it. To create that alert out of the blue... Whenever Shido had done anything even remotely similar, it was almost always after something major. And he was pretty sure Shido wasn’t the one who’d triggered this change for once, not to mention Gemela wasn’t nearly as prone to reacting to stimulus as Rei’s own CAD. Then there was how tired Viv had seemed over the last week.

Increasingly so day after day. And now she wasn't picking up his calls? Something had happened, and he didn't have time to explain.

But when he looked at Aria, thinking to apologize and just tell her that he had to find Viv, he stopped short. His girlfriend was taking him in with such alarm—with such concern—that he was abruptly reminded that it had indeed been her who'd affirmed his suspicions about Shido in the first place.

That, and the fact that he wasn't Viv's only friend. No anymore.

"Something's happened," he said quickly, returning to wrenching on his jacket even as he slid one bare foot into his right boot. "Shido just sent me an alert. Something about a 'link' manifesting. I don't actually know what it means."

"What?" Aria looked as confused as he'd ever seen her. "A 'link'? To what?"

"To Gemela," Rei answered even as he bent down to tie up his laces. "And when I try to call Viv, she isn't picking up."

He was pretty sure it took Aria even less time than it had him to put the pieces together.

"Oh... Oh no."

And then she was out of bed too, scrambling just as quickly as Rei to find her own clothes. He didn't stop her. For one thing he didn't think she would have heard anything to the contrary, but for another he felt a little better about the situation with the idea of Aria being at his side. Of all of them, even him, she was the one who tended to be able to keep her head on straight in shit situations, and he suspected the girls' friendship was long past a point that Viv would be as grateful to see his girlfriend's face as she might be his own, wherever she was.

"Dude, Rei..." a groggy voice grumbled out of nowhere. "It's like 0100... What are you—Oh."

Rei and Aria both paused in their mad dash to get dressed, looking around at the door. Only barely illuminated in the dim light of the smart glass band that encircled the

room, a tall, bare-chested boy with blond hair was blinking between the pair of them in surprise. Layton “Catcher” Catchwick had one hand up by his handsome face like he’d been rubbing his yellow eyes when he’d realized Rei wasn’t alone, and wasn’t the only one. Even as they’d looked around, another shape joined him, the dark skin of one of the girl’s shoulders exposed through the neck hole of an overlarge pajama shirt, silvery braids in a tight bun atop her head.

“The hell, guys?” Chancery Cashe seemed much more awake—a quite a bit more annoyed—than Catcher. “What was the noise? We’ve got to be up early for train—”

But then Firesong’s Lancer too, stopped, mouth dropping open as she took in Rei and Aria, the former paused in the process of buttoning on his jacket, the latter having only just gotten her pants on over her waist.

“Oookay then...” Chancery got out after a second, purple-green gaze flitting first to Rei, then Aria, then back again. “Right... Not our business. Come on, Catcher.” She grabbed the speechless Saber by the elbow and started to pull him away from the door. “You two just do us a favor and keep the noise to a minimum next time you—”

Rei didn’t let her finish. It was past the time of secrets amongst the squad, and this was something they needed to know.

“Something happened to Viv.” He interrupted quickly, resuming his buttoning, fingers nimbly flying up his jacket. “We’re going to find her.”

Catcher and Chancery stopped together, looking back at him.

“What?” the Saber asked sharply. The mischievous look that had been building in his eyes before Chancery had made to pull him back was instantly gone, as was any sign of fatigue. “What do you mean?”

“I don’t know.” Rei, fully-dressed now as he grabbed his cap from his desk, glanced over his shoulder to see Aria starting to tie her boots, her shirt and jacket already buttoned. “Shido... did something weird.”

“Weird...?” Chancery repeated. “Weird how? More weird than usual, you mean?”

Rei opened his mouth to answer, looking back at them, but in that moment a third shape appeared in the doorway, face half-scrunched at the unwelcome light of the room, even dim as it was.

“Guys, can y’all keep it down?” Jack Benaly, their fifth and final suitemate—and the strongest Brawler among the first year Galens students—mumbled. “Martin’s got Red Crown doing some late practice nights, and I—”

But then he, too, stopped at the sight of the scene.

“... Laurent?” he muttered, squinting at Aria like he didn’t believe what he was seeing. “What are you doing—?”

But Aria cut him off.

“Rei, let’s go,” she said quickly, stepping passed him in a flash and slipping between the trio outside the, though she addressed Catcher and Chancery as she moved by. “You two stay put in case Viv comes back here. We’ll message you as soon as we figure out what’s going on.”

“Like hell you will,” Catcher growled, already turning on his heels and making for his room. “I’m coming w—”

“Catcher. Stay. Here.” Rei half asked, half insisted as he followed Aria. “There’s no time, and someone needs to be here if she comes home. We’ll explain when we know what’s happening.”

And then, before anyone could voice any other protest, he and Aria were out the still-open door of the suite and into the hall, bolting for the stairs.

“Any idea where she would be?” Aria asked even as they vaulted over the railing to the second floor, not bothering with the actual steps. “Any at all?”

“West Center,” Rei answered without hesitating, following right behind her. He’d already considered this exact question for himself. “I’ll bet you anything she was training when whatever it was happened.”

“Training?!” Aria hissed. “Seriously? This late at night? What about curfew?!”

“Aria, I don’t know,” Rei answered as they jumped again down to the bottom floor. “But I think she’s actually been doing it all week. Think about it. She’s been so tired. And like you said at Sectionals, she’s been stressed about everyone having an Ability but her and stuff. I think she’s been pushing herself even more than the rest of us, and without letting us know.”

“Hence West Center,” Aria muttered, catching on. “Too much of a chance of running into one of us in East. Oh Viv, what have you gotten yourself into...?”

Rei only grunted in agreement before the double doors of Kanes were opening for them, and they were sprinting out into the winter evening.

They’d barely made it 10 feet beyond the building’s overhang when they were forced to stop, sliding to an awkward halt on the cobblestone as a blast of unnatural air and a blinding light cut downward through the night.

“Woah!” they both yelled in surprise, each forced to snap a hand up and take hold of their caps to keep them from blowing away, squinting up into the wind. Descending sharply from above, a flyer was dropping towards the path in the grounds they’d been about to take, its headlights blazing and the force of its vertical engines clearing what little leftover snow was left between the stones under their boots. Both at a loss, Rei and Aria watched with mirrored open mouths as the vehicle touched down—the whirl of it only minimally dimming as it did—and the hatch door at its back swung open almost before it had finished settling.

Then they were snapping up into matching, automatic salutes as none other than Valera Dent herself stepped out of the flyer, standing tall in the rushing blast of icy wind, noise, and brightness.

The stone in Rei’s gut redoubled. It wasn’t the flooding light of the flyer that silhouetted Galen’s Chief Combat Officer in a halo as she moved in their direction at a quick clip. It wasn’t even the Captain’s disheveled state he could make out once she was closer, her jacket the only part of her regular black-and-golds she was wearing,

unbuttoned over a loose shirt and jeans that looked like they'd been hastily pulled on. Rei barely registered either of those things.

Instead, what had Rei suddenly scared was the look on the woman's face. The expression, especially strange as it strained the handsome features of the famous 'Iron Bishop' of the Astra System, the S-Rank who claimed the title of the strongest User in the entirety of Castalon. He'd never seen that look before on Dent's face. Not when he'd been spasming on the floor of the training field after his last parameter test had gone south. Not even when he'd woken up in the Kenneth Arena hospital wing after Central had hacked his finals match against Aria to set six S-Ranked holograms against his immobilized body. Both of those times, Valera Dent had looked worried, and looked furious.

But he'd never seen the woman look afraid.

Bad, Rei couldn't help but think again even as Dent seemed to realize for the first time that they were there. Very bad...

"Cadets?" The Chief Combat Instructor's brown eyes went wide at the sight of them, stopping short. She had to shout to be heard over the flyer's still-whining engine, and it seemed to be in genuine surprise that she took Rei and Aria in over the black line that bisected her face and marked the full-frame prosthetic that made up her jaw and most of her nose and cheeks. "What are you doing out here?"

"Something's happened, ma'am!" Rei called back, deciding it wasn't the time to beat around the bush. "To Viv—to Cadet Arada, I mean! We were just going to look for her!"

If Dent had been astonished before, it only redoubled now. "To Ara—Ward, how did you know that?"

Again the weight got heavier, and again Rei felt the cold. She knew. Dent already knew. That wasn't a good sign. He opened his mouth to repeat the question right back at the woman, but Aria beat him to it.

“Ma’am!” she called out over the noise “What’s happened?!”

The Iron Bishop tensed, and a hitch in the howl of the engines at her back had the woman’s jacket billowing around her as she took them in. There was that fear again. Rei could see it even more clearly now as the woman finally answer.

“I was coming to get you. Both of you...” She looked more pained with every word. “It is Arada. Like you said. She’s been hurt, Cadets... She’s been hurt bad.”

CHAPTER 3

They did not, as Rei had assumed they were going to, make an accelerated trip to the Institute Hospital after Dent ordered he and Aria both into the flyer, joining them before shutting the door behind her to cut off the wind and noise. Instead, the moment they were in the air the vehicle swung eastward, zipping right over the closest of Galen's stone walls before climbing almost straight up to join one of the lower skylanes that led into Castalon proper.

"Ma'am... Where are we going?" Aria asked nervously once they'd slipped into glow of the city, the smallest of the towering skyscrapers lined up in rows on either side of them no less than 400 or so floors in height. As they did, the world became bright in a way only the nightlife of a planet's most-thriving metropolis could manage.

And yet Dent's face still only seemed to darken in the seat across from them at the question.

"Cadet Arada was found unresponsive in West Center about twenty minutes ago," she answered in a subdued tone. "She's alive—" she brought up a hand quickly as Rei and Aria both opened their mouths in alarm "—but the medical drone that alerted us to the situation assessed her condition as beyond what the Galens is capable of treating safely, which Lieutenant Colonel Mayd has since confirmed. She's been rushed to a specialized unit at Altmore Medical Center in the city, one specifically designed for Users."

None of this did anything to help Rei's stomach, of course. If anything, he felt abruptly nauseous. He'd been in bad shape before. He'd ripped a hole through his lung not three weeks ago, and been ganged up on by six of his classmates the semester before that. And that was wasn't even mentioning the hellish state he'd woken up in the previous weekend after his body had largely torn itself apart after the hack at Sectionals. And yet on those occasion, the Galens Institute—and Kenneth Academy respectively

for that most recent incident—had clearly been judged at least minimally adequate to address his needs.

So for Viv to be in such bad shape that she was beyond the school’s ability to treat her...

“What happened?” he asked hoarsely, feeling he was voicing the question for the thousandth time among them even in the 10 minutes it had been since Shido had sent that alert. “What was she doing?”

“We’re... not completely sure,” the Iron Bishop answered, but she sounded hesitant, looking out the window to her left at the passing buildings. “We don’t have enough information yet to paint the whole picture, so I’m not going to speculate. The lieutenant colonel is ahead of us though, so I’m hoping he’ll have more to share once we reach Almore.”

There was a moment of quiet after that, a tense silence as all of them—Dent included, Rei was pretty sure—couldn’t help but contemplate the worst. Rei almost reached out to take Aria’s hand for comfort in fact, but restrained himself as he swallowed and looked instead out his own window.

He’d barely taken in the afterglow of Castalon’s neon lights for a few seconds, though, before the Bishop spoke again.

“Ward... I need you to answer me this time. How did you know?”

Rei turned back to the woman, but she hadn’t actually taken her own gaze away from the city even as she’d asked. He traded a glance with Aria, but she only offered a nervous pinching of her brow, which he could understand. Shido was a tricky subject to navigate, no matter who it was that was asking. The nature of his CAD’s S-Ranked Growth spec made it consistently astonishing to those out of—and often even in—the know about it, but just the same he had to be careful, in particular when it came to new developments.

But even setting aside the fact that Valera Dent was already aware of the Shido's greatest secret, the woman had long since been someone Rei considered well and truly in the fold of his Device's extraordinary nature.

"Shido, ma'am," he answered after a second, looking back to the Bishop. "It gave me an alert maybe ten minutes ago."

"An alert?" Valera did turn back to him now, frowning. "What sort of alert? It told you that Arada was hurt?"

"Not... Not exactly, no..." Rei responded uncertainly.

And then he explained as best he could.

It only took a minute or two—plus a screenshot of the notification—but when he finished explaining what had happened in more detail, neither Dent nor Aria seemed able to speak. The latter only gaped at him, mouthing at the air as her red hair and cap were framed against the city lights outside her window. She'd been quick enough to take him at his word that something had happened when he'd inadvertently dragged her out of bed, but now that she had all the information, Rei rather thought it looked like his girlfriend's brain had short-circuited.

Dent, on the other hand...

As he took in the captain in silence, waiting for someone else to speak, Rei saw an expression at once both strange and familiar flash across the woman's prosthetic features. There was shock there, yes—maybe not as pronounced as Aria's but present all the same—and there might also have been just a hint of alarm, a hint of concern at the information he'd just provided to the woman.

But deeper than that, layered behind those clearer feelings like Dent didn't want anyone to see them, Rei—not for the first time—could have sworn he saw something very much like triumph flaring in the Iron Bishop's brown eyes...

"'Link manifestation'...?" Dent repeated slowly, not looking away from Rei. "And you have no idea what that's about, Cadet? You're sure?"

“A hundred percent, ma’am,” Rei said automatically, but before he could continue he stopped, considering this answer. Again he glanced at Aria, but unfortunately she seemed still a little too shellshocked to help him in the moment.

So he made the call himself.

“Err... Maybe more like... seventy percent, actually...?”

Dent’s gaze sharpened abruptly, and she’d opened her mouth—very clearly about to order him to clarify this statement—when their flyer slowed, then started to descend. A quick look outside had them all taking note of the accenting lines of brilliant green light that lined the massive glass face of the skyscraper whose upper floors they seemed to be dropping vertically along, and Rei realized they must have been arriving.

“Ward, you are going to explain what you mean by that later,” Dent told him sharply, making it very clear she wasn’t making a request. “No dancing. No dodging. This is important. Possibly even a thousand time more so than you could know.”

“Yes, ma’am,” was all Rei answered with, nodding. He had to agree, after all. Obviously he’d never been the only one interested in Shido’s growth and progress, but in the past week—especially after the Sectionals attack—that fact had been brought into extra sharp relief for him. He had no doubt whatever was going on with his Device would be of keen interest to a thousand other eyes, some of them likely even more knowledgeable of his situation than he was. It felt a little unfair, but he’d come to terms with it. At the end of the day, Rei couldn’t let himself forget he was a soldier of the ISCM, a cog in the great machine of war and entertainment that kept the Intersystem Collective safe.

At any cost.

The flyer soon slowed further, then came to a brief, hovering halt before setting down gently onto a massive protruding platform some 300 stories up the tower that had to have been the Almore Medical Center. Sure enough, as Dent opened the door for them once more and stepped quickly out, the hospital’s name came into view in a

curving neon line overtop the large, half-circle entrance that formed an intruding divot in the side of the building, leading to a long series of automated doors already opening and closing as several dozen people came and went even this late at night. Waiting just long enough to make sure Aria had come to her senses and realized they were exiting, Rei followed the captain out into the cold again, and when all three of them were clear of the flyer they jogged together towards the entrance. Several heads turned their way as they passed, scores of the tired eyes of staff and civilians alike snapping awake and wide when they caught sight of them. Most seemed to notice the Bishop first—as was to be expected—but Rei had to ignore those attentions that fell on him and Aria after that, many people looking only further surprised—and some even more excited—as the two of them were recognized in turn. It was still a strange feeling, but even if Rei hadn't been singularly focused on why they were there, Sectionals had been a hundred times worse. At least they weren't outright accosted by paparazzi this time, and he suspected that those few people who might have been keen on approaching them were likely—and fortunately so, given the circumstance—put off by the Bishop's presence.

That was probably doubly so when a short man in green scrubs caught sight of the three of them from where he'd been hugging himself for warmth by the doors, lifting a hand when he did to wave them down. As they hurried his way, the word 'ALTMORE' became clear over his right breast pocket, displayed in clean white in all their NOEDs. There was a name there, too, Rei thought, but the man moved too quickly as they approached, already backpedalling into the building by the time they reached him.

"Captain," he said in gruff greeting, apparently recognizing Dent on sight and turning once they were at the doors to immediately start leading the way into a grand lobby of black and white marble, the lights hanging from the raised ceiling above them so bright it might as well have been daylight out. "I'm Josh Alberty, one of the nurses in the User Treatment Unit. They sent me to come get you when we heard you were on the way. We're already working on your cadet."

“Any news?” Dent asked quickly.

The nurse—Alberty—made a noncommittal shrug even as they weaved through the mill of patients and other staff to hurry down one of the innumerable halls that led out of the lobby. “Not much, sorry. I wasn’t in the room long. She’s definitely not out of danger, but I can tell you she was stable when she got to us. EMTs and their drones did a good job with her on the way here, which is always a good sign. Having your chief medical officer in the transport definitely helped, too, I bet.”

“She’s okay, though?” Aria seemed unable to stop herself from asking in a rush.

Alberty looked over his shoulder to take her and Rei in with one blue-green eye, then, like he was assessing them. After a second, he offered something that might have been a smile.

“She’s being seen by the absolute best the UTU’s got. I always say you shouldn’t worry until there’s a reason too.”

Rei was grateful for the man, then, because the answer seemed to appease a bit of Aria’s concern at the very least. He, on the other hand, hadn’t missed the careful choice of the words, nor it seemed had Dent, because he thought he saw the woman’s jaw clench slightly.

The hospital—as was the nature of such places in Rei’s all-too-extensive experience—was a winding maze of halls, tunnels, stairs, ramps, and the like. Alberty led them deftly, but just the same it was a half-dozen turns and an elevator ride down about 100 floors before they appeared to reach their destination, coming to the end of a lengthy double-wide passage to a set of reinforced steel doors horizontally marked with yellow-and-black tape. Along the wall over these the name ‘Lindon C. Wight Wing - User Treatment Unit’ was bright in green letters atop the white paint of the walls, and reaching them it took a second of Alberty pausing to stand and look up at a small black box set under the words before the doors opened with a hiss of decompressing air. They swung outward quickly—an impressive feat given each of them wasn’t less than 3

feet thick—and the moment the gap was wide enough for them to fit, Alberty led the way inside.

The User Treatment Unit—or the ‘UTU’, apparently—was at once highly underwhelming and utterly awe inspiring. It was tiny—no more than five or six rooms in a circle around a single wide nurse’s station—and largely absent any of the activity or bustle they’d seen everywhere else as they’d made their way deeper into Altmore. There were no windows as far as Rei could tell, either, with the only illumination coming from the white strip of solar lights that ringed the hall’s black ceiling, splitting a line off into each door like a trail to be followed.

On the other hand, if Rei had been in a state of mind to do so, he probably would have stopped to gawk into every room he could, open-mouthed and salivating at the sheer amount of tech that lined the floors, walls, and ceiling of each of the spaces, making the UTU feel like the belly of some alien mothership.

There were anti-grav suspension tanks—long, transparent containers built to hold a human body still and stable for extended periods with zero risk of pressure sores or the like—along with User-grade treadmills and various other rehab equipment, some of them so massive and solid-looking they had to have been rated for A- or S-Ranked fighters. There were testing bays with more screens than Rei could count—reminding him of the equipment used by the ISCM medical staff during the CAD Assignment Exam to quantify their red blood cell count and other such metrics—and one of the rooms housed a massive arching machine with a thousand different mechanical arms that could only have been some kind of specialized surgical unit. These and more were all complimented by a thousand different tubes, cables, and wired tools that hung from the ceiling in various places, all neatly clipped to the walls for easy access and use to form mesmerizing, semi-mechanized curtains in some of the rooms. Any other day Rei would have begged to be allowed to take pictures so he and Catcher—and maybe even

Logan, who'd been proving himself as avid an SCT enthusiast as either of them—could have fawned over every square inch of the place and the marvels it contained.

Instead, Rei had eyes only for the single brightly-lit room on the far side of the nurse's station—the only one showing any signs of activity.

A lone, broad-shouldered figure stood with his back to their newly-arrived group there, taking in the rush of action happening on the other side of the transparent smart-glass wall before him. It took a moment for Rei to recognize the man, and he blinked in surprise as he realized the figure was none other than Galen's own command officer, Colonel Rama Guest. Even more so than Dent, the Colonel—the only other S-Ranked User among the school staff, though only a 'lowly' Pawn-Class to the Captain's Knight—had never looked less the part of his position. He was in a rumpled black shirt with a sweater pulled hastily over it, and rather even than jeans he was sporting a pair of well-worn sweat pants. His brown hair—usually kept clean and tidy in a long ponytail—was a loose curtain down his back, and he looked to be wearing house slippers rather than any real shoes.

It couldn't have been more apparent the man had bolted from his bed, grabbing whatever and whichever articles of clothing had been in reach as he'd rushed from his rooms on campus.

"This is where I leave you," Albery said by way of farewell when they were halfway around the hall. "I think it goes without saying, but please do not attempt to enter the room without permission from one of the physicians. Understood?"

All three of them nodded, Rei and Aria doing so only numbly. With that, the nurse hurried ahead, pausing again before the room's door for a second biometric lock, then slipped inside. His appearance must have alerted Guest, because the Colonel seemed to come to from some distant place, standing up a little straighter and turning to face them, hands still at his back.

“Colonel.” Dent stopped only long enough to salute the man before stepping up beside him to peer through the wall herself. “How’s she doing?”

“Breathing,” Guest grunted in answer, turning back to the room himself. “But that’s about all I know...”

He’d only given Rei and Aria the briefest of appraising looks before returning his attention to the situation. Neither of them noticed, having even forgotten to salute themselves.

They were both too busy staring, horrified, at the activity happening within the unit.

Viv was already suspended inside of the one of the anti-grav tanks. She’d clearly been cut out of her combat suit, because her modesty was only currently being shielded by a white sheet that covered her lithe body as she floated in the air on her back in the vessel. She had more lines and wires attached to her arms, legs, neck, and chest than Rei had ever seen, and even as he watched others were being added to the mix. No less than six masked people in either green scrubs or white coats were rushing around the girl in surgically-ordered chaos, shouts and calls for various items, IVs, and data adding to the steady beeping of a heart monitor and the low thrum of the small anti-grav engine that had to be in the floor.

And that wasn’t even the worst of it.

Rei felt a pinch at his side, and he blinked around to find that Aria hadn’t looked at him, but was instead staring open-mouthed even as she let out a hoarse whisper.

“Rei... Her head... Look at her head...”

He frowned and turned back to the room, not immediately following.

Then his stomach dropped through the floor.

Somehow, in the surging bustle on the other side of the wall, he had missed the most alarming sight of all. At the top of the tank Viv’s mouth was slack, and there seemed to be red residue that could only have been dried blood cling to her lips and

nostrils. That was all of her face that Rei could see, though, because the rest of her features were obscured by a sleek, sterile-white module that capped the girl's skull like the upper part of a helmet to cover her hair, eyes, ears, and part of the back of her neck. A green light was pulsing steadily from under the metal along the contact line of the unit, and though Rei had actually only seen a similar machine once before, he recognized it immediately. A DTRU. A "deep-tissue reparative unit". A device that specialized in helping localized healing of truly traumatic organ damage.

And there was only one part of the body this particular DTRU could have been designed for.

"Oh no..." Rei heard himself choke out.

In the early phases of CAD-tech development, he was aware that brain damage had been a pervasive issue. First in the animal test subjects in the initial phases, with things improving quickly until only older Users—who had called on their Devices thousands on thousands of times over many decades of entertainment and services—were still at risk of developing cognitive complications. The fact was that CADs were mechanical hardware that interacted directly with organic tissue, something so taxing on the nervous system that NOEDs were the only form of biotech commonly integrated into the human body even after 500 years of access to quantum computers. Only the improvement of neuroline growth and a multitude of other steady changes to Devices had eradicated the problem for Users entirely, and that had taken more than a century.

But in extreme circumstances...

"You idiot, Viv..." Rei muttered to himself, so quietly he was pretty sure not even Aria beside him had heard.

He thought he knew, now, what had happened. Thought he had some sense of the situation, seeing the DTRU and thinking of Shido's notification again. It was possible to overtax a CAD's sensory input, of course, especially early on. Rei had

managed it himself on more than one occasion, the first of which had been in the Commencement fight at the start of the previous semester. He'd woken up on a stretcher in the Arena underworks, having passed out from overstimulation after refusing to go down even after Aria—then only a new classmate and his opponent in the exhibition bout—had run him through belly to spine with Hippolyta. It wasn't smart, but it happened, and passing out was the body's warning that what had just occurred was stupid, and should not be repeated, just like falling unconscious was if one held their breath too long. Yes, Rei had ignored those physiological warnings before, and not infrequently.

But Viv seemed to have taken it to an entirely new level...

"She cooked her neuroline," he hissed, looking around passed Dent to the Colonel. "Didn't she? She pushed herself until she basically fried her wiring."

Guest's cheek twitched, and Rei realized for the first time that there was something more than concern there, in the man's face.

There was fire, too.

"Full marks, Cadet," the man growled, at last pulling his hands around from behind his back to cross his arms over his chest. "That is the working theory, yes. We're not sure how, yet, but the activity logs in the training chamber she was found in indicate as much as well."

Between Rei and the Colonel, Dent tensed at that.

"Meaning what, sir?" she asked slowly.

"Meaning that somehow, some way, Cadet Arada got access to S-Ranked training simulations, and was foolish enough to try her luck against them. Repeatedly."

"Oh, Viv..." Aria breathed in disbelief on Rei's other side, bringing a hand up to touch her fingers to the glass, like she wanted to reach out to the girl floating in the middle of the chaos of the room on the other side.

Rei, on the other hand, could only stare, cold drenching every inch of his body.

Bad, he thought again for the hundredth time. Very bad.

It was just as he'd suspected, and he wanted to kick himself for not seeing the signs. Viv, who he'd already been clued in on was feeling like she was being left behind. Viv, who'd been looking more and more tired over the course of the last week, like she hadn't been getting enough sleep. He hadn't put the pieces together at the time, but they'd been there, right there. How his best friend had gotten access to S-Ranked simulations—a training level Rei doubted any Galens student other than a very select few at the absolute top levels of the third years had permissions to use—the MIND only knew. He didn't have the capacity to worry about it, in the moment. More important to the immediate future was that Viv would make it through this, would make it through and wake up so that Rei could kill her himself for being such a dumbass.

And ask her if she actually thought he would ever leave her—her, arguably the sole reason he'd escaped Grandcrest and gotten to step foot onto the Galens grounds in the first place—behind...?

Rei couldn't help himself, then. Even conscious of Dent and Guest at his left, he reached out to take Aria's free hand, deciding as he did not to think too hard as to whether the trembling he felt as he did so was his, hers, or theirs to share...

He wasn't exactly sure how long the four of them stood outside the room like that. Maybe 15 minutes, maybe an hour. At one point one of the nurses came over to let them know they were temporarily making the wall opaque, but even after their view was blocked still none of them spoke. Then when the glass became clear again—revealing that Viv had been changed into more-considerate grey-and-white hospital gown that still accommodated all the wires and IV's attached to her—they still didn't say a word. For a while after that the bustle continued in the room, if a bit more subdued, until at long last a yellow-haired woman in a white coat—who looked to have been giving most of the commands—stepped away from Viv and seemed to make the call for the others to do the same. For nearly half a minute the six members of the care

team stood in silence like that, every eye on a different monitor somewhere in the room. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, the doctor spoke again from behind her mask, and the team all seemed to relax at once, then started to make for the room door, leaving only one female nurse behind with her NOED alive in her eyes, clearly staying to supervise.

“Are they done?” Aria asked immediately, the first of the four of them to speak. “Is she okay? What’s happening??”

Neither Dent nor Guest answered her, and Rei could only squeeze her hand in a reassuring sort of way as the door in the wall to the right released and slid open again, momentarily heightening the sounds of the monitors and anti-grav engine. The care team had a brief discussion in the hall, then four of them split away in a hurry without so much as glancing towards Rei and the others, which might have been odd if the fifth hadn’t promptly turned to them to speak in a familiar, wheezing voice.

“Thank you all for coming so promptly. I am pleased to report that Cadet Arada is out of immediate danger.”

Lieutenant Colonel Willem Mayd, Galen’s aged Chief Medical Officer, was removing his mask with gnarled hands even as he approached them. An elderly figure with a white beard and rare spectacles, the man’s face was pale despite his assuring words, cutting short the rush of relief Rei had started to feel.

“That is not to say she is not still at risk,” the Lieutenant Colonel continued with a gentle look at Aria, who had started to perk up. “The cadet’s condition is severe, and she will need to remain in observation here until she wakes up, at which point we will be able assess what, if any, damage may have occurred to her system.”

“Damage, sir...?” Dent asked from behind Rei, still sounding more subdued than he thought he’d ever heard the woman speak. “What sort of damage...?”

Mayd seemed only able to shake his head, though. “I can only speculate, unfortunately.” He looked around at Viv through the glass, whose pulse the supervising

nurse seemed to be double-checking manually. “The largest concern we have by far is that Arada is currently suffering some moderate cerebral edema. Brain swelling. It’s to be expected in cases like this—a significant overdraw of Cognition, particularly when combined with excessive input of a Device’s sensory systems—but it is still problematic. It’s why she was brought here.” The man lifted a hand to indicate the UTU. “Galens lacks the tools required to optimize prognosis in such situations. The fact that we managed to get the cadet here so quickly is a good sign—a very good sign—but she is certainly not out of the woods just yet.”

There was a pause at this, all of them taking in the Lieutenant Colonel’s explanation, but it was kept short when the Bishop spoke again.

“You didn’t answer the question, sir,” she said quietly. “What sort of damage are we talking...?”

Mayd looked momentarily pained, then let out a sigh, like he’d been hoping Dent wouldn’t push the issue.

It was clear why as he answered.

“If Cadet Arada suffers any lasting damage—and I do mean if—her complications could range from practically imperceivable memory deficits to severe physical or cognitive disabilities. Or both.” He grimaced slightly. “It is apparent from the logs and the information we’ve gathered from the medical drone she had on hand during her training that the cadet put herself through something... terrible. The outcomes of which could be very, very dire...”

Another quiet, longer this time.

And then Aria asked the question Rei didn’t think he could have brought himself to.

“Sir... Could she... Could Viv... die?”

Willem Mayd’s eyes were as steady and calm as Rei had ever see them as he took Aria in carefully.

“Such an outcome is very doubtful, Laurent. Very doubtful. And certainly not worth dwelling on unless we have any indication that Cadet Arada is slipping in that direction.”

‘Yes’, Rei translated for himself, squeezing Aria’s hand again as it twitched in his own grasp, she too clearly understanding the answer for what it actually was. The kindest way to say ‘yes’...

“Lieutenant Colonel, you say you’ve gathered information from the drone as well?” Colonel Guest’s usual strength sounded to be returning to his voice. “Maddison hasn’t had the opportunity to pull those logs for me yet, as I’ve put her on contacting Arada’s parents. Any idea how this happened?”

Mayd shook his head again. “I’m afraid not. I did pull the information myself on the way over here, but...” He looked back towards Viv. “It’s odd. Cadet Arada should not have had the ability to access any combat simulations ranked above the middle Bs, much less S. She would have had to get special permission for that, and even then supervision should have been provided. And yet...”

“And yet?” Guest’s press was angry, distant thunder, and Rei and Aria both looked over their shoulder’s to find the Colonel too, watching Viv intently, the barest hint of orange light in the dim reflection of his face in the glass.

“And yet there’s no record...” Mayd finished, sounding grim. “Nothing. No mark of access granting other than metadata indicating it was done. No permission signed, or even sent for signature. It’s actually the reason I asked the Captain to fetch these two.” His eyes were still kind as they shifted to Rei and Aria. “I was hoping for... information.”

He left the request open-ended, not making a question or demand out of it, nor pressing them. Just the same, Rei felt the sudden urge to shout, to tell them all everything, anything he could think of that might help the situation, dangerous as it could be put out in the open.

Aria beat him to it.

“Cadet Arada has likely been overextending herself all week, sir,” she answered in half a whisper, half a rush. “We... We didn’t realize it. Not until tonight.”

“Overextending herself how, Cadet?” Mayd pushed gently.

“It’s possible she hasn’t been sleeping. At least not much. Instead, she’s probably been staying up training.”

“Yes. She has. That much we are already aware of just from the activity logs. The fact that she also seems to have been granted permission to ignore curfew is another mystery, for the moment. Another allowance apparently given without any staff being directly linked to that allowance. Could you, perhaps, enlighten us as to why Cadet Arada chose to put herself through this, though?” Mayd lifted a hand to wave through the glass. “Even a suspicion?”

“We think she’s afraid of being left behind...”

The words slipped out before Rei could so much as consider them. They refused to be held back, refused to be suppressed. They’d fallen from his mouth like his guilt needed desperately to escape along with them.

“We think she’s pushed herself to ‘catch up’, whatever that means,” he answered quietly, finding himself having a hard time meeting the Lieutenant Colonel’s eyes as they fell on him, now. “After Catcher and Chancery at Sectionals... then Aria... We think Viv’s afraid of being left behind...”

“Is that so...?” Mayd looked to be considering this. “Hmm... I do suppose one can follow the logic...”

“You think so?” Guest barked, though Rei couldn’t help but doubt his anger was being directed at Viv in the moment. “Viviana Arada is rapidly proving the most promising Duelist the Institute has seen in a generation. What would possess her to feel like she could ever be ‘left behind?’”

“A multitude of factors, Colonel, the least of which being the extraordinary circumstances of the situation that child in there has found herself embroiled in, I suspect.” Mayd hadn’t looked away from Rei even as he answered. “If anything, one can sympathize, I believe. An odd thing though, Cadet Ward... Laurent mention you’d developed some of these suspicions tonight? Is that correct?”

Rei swallowed, seeing the question coming.

He decided to head it off.

“Yes, sir,” he answered, finally finding it himself to let go of Aria’s hand. “I—we—put it together after... after Shido notified me it had linked with Gemela...”

There was a silence at this. Whatever Mayd had expected to hear in answer to his query, it clearly hadn’t been that, because the old man was staring at Rei with genuine surprise for once, eyes going a little wide behind his glasses. Behind them, too, the Colonel had gone quiet, while Dent—who seemed for some reason only to have grown more and more withdrawn throughout their discussion—didn’t say a word.

It was Mayd who found his tongue first.

“Cadet Ward...” he started slowly, like he wasn’t sure he’d heard properly. “I would ask you to explain what you mean by that, if you pl—”

But then the Lieutenant Colonel paused, blinking and straightening in surprise as his NOED lit up suddenly in his eyes. Behind them, Rei thought he felt Guest and Dent shift too, and he and Aria both looked around to find the pair’s frames alight as well, both expressions puzzled while they read whatever notice had just flared across their vision.

And then Dent’s jaw clenched.

“She’s here?” she snarled like she couldn’t believe what she was reading. “Here?”

“Apparently,” the colonel answered in a growl. “How convenient for her...” Then, for some reason, his eyes fell on Rei, taking him in like he was considering something.

It was only a second before he made his decision, and the order came before Rei or Aria could ask what was going on.

“Dent. Get them out of sight.”

WHOOM!

With a blast of air and a shout of shock from both of them, Rei and Aria found themselves each taken up by one arm in an iron grip and wrenched painful along at a terrifying speed. In a blink, though, the captain had them in front of a nearby room, the door already open since the space wasn't occupied.

“In here, both of you,” Dent said quickly, half guiding, half shoving the pair of them in, one hand moving to the inside wall by the door the moment it was free. “Do not come out, do not make a sound. She probably doesn't know you're here.”

“She?!” Rei demanded even as he and Aria both stumbled back to catch themselves against the momentum of the Bishop's strength. “Who is 'she'?!”

“Ward,” Dent snapped even as her fingers blurred through the controls that had popped up at her touch, pulling up the wall display options and turning the transparent glass opaque in a blink. “That was not a request, that was an order. Do not come out. Do not make a sound. We'll explain after.”

And then she was gone again, leaving the door—perhaps deliberately?—open behind her.

For a second Rei and Aria just stood there, staring out into the clear hall and the empty nurse's station that was all they could see from where they stood. Rei wanted to march right back outside and demand to know what was going on, but something kept him from doing so, something held him back...

Had that been... fear in the Bishop's voice?

“Rei... come on...”

Aria's quiet voice—couple with her tugging on his sleeve—had him stepping back away from the open door. They were in one of the less-crowded patient rooms—the

one with a large, multi-armed surgical device that hung over an empty suspension tank—so it was a simple act of moving away from the door along the wall to get completely out of sight. It wasn't a second too soon, either, because before they'd made the corner Aria seemed to be aiming for there was a clunk and the sound of releasing air.

The UTU doors were opening, Rei realized with a thrill he couldn't explain.

Click-click-click...

The sounds was all too familiar. Heavy soles across a hard floor. Leather military boots, confident in their stride. It shouldn't have stood out, and even if it had it should probably have been comforting.

And yet, for some reason, it made the hair on Rei's arms stand on end...

Click-click-click...

And then the footsteps stopped.

"Colonel Guest," a woman's voice, clear but tinged with the hint of an accent unknown to Rei, greeted Guest politely. "It's been too long. How nice to see you."

"And you, ma'am," Guest's answer was smooth, but guarded. "Though I have to apologize for my and my staff's presentation. I don't think we were aware you were in-system, much less planetside. Had we been informed you were coming, we would have—"

"It doesn't matter," the woman cut him off easily, tone as even as it was firm, like there was nothing else to discuss on the matter. "I'd been hoping to catch General Laurent before he took his leave of the city. I missed him, regrettably, but as a result I was already in Castalon when I was notified of the situation."

"Yes," Guest again, and it sounded like he'd turned back to face the room Viv was in. "It's unfortunate, but Lieutenant Colonel Mayd here has a handle on it, along with the team here. Cadet Arada is being well looked after, though we appreciate—"

“Ah. I’m sorry. Cadet Arada’s unfortunate condition is not what I was referring to. I only found out about that a moment ago.”

There was a moment of silence.

And then, despite having been snubbed of greeting, Lieutenant Colonel Mayd’s voice came polite as could be.

“Then might you enlighten us on the ‘situation’ you are referring to, General Abel?”

Rei’s mouth went dry, his whole body stiffening. In front of him, Aria, too, tensed, and she whirled in silence to stare at him with wide eyes, like she wanted to yell out the connection she, too, had just made.

“Of course, you wouldn’t have been informed yet,” the woman who could only be Shira Abel, Central Command general and one of the signatories of the very transfer orders that had oh-so-recently turned Rei’s world upside down, answered smoothly. As she continued, there was a dull sound like a finger tapping on glass. “As it happens, you may be pleased to know that Cadet Arada in there just became the second first year student at Galens to get assigned a User-Unique Ability...”

CHAPTER 4

“... Excuse me?”

Guest’s question came in something that was just louder than a growl, breaking the several seconds of a silence so deafening it had seemed to drown out even the faint beep of Viv’s heart monitor Rei could still make out from her room.

Fortunately, Shira Abel proved herself anything but a coy sort of woman.

“It’s as I said, Colonel,” the general answered smoothly. “As of about forty-five minutes ago, Viviana Arada was assigned a User-Unique Ability. The second first year at Galens to receive one. The second first year ever in fact, and only one of a stark handful of sub-S-Ranked User in the history of the ISCM, much less students. ‘Endwalker’, it’s apparently called, though obviously we have no idea what it does just yet. I was on my way to try and ascertain just that information when I was made aware of the Arada’s condition. Unfortunate circumstances, to say the least.”

Through his owned stunned haze, the words—despite being well-chosen—left Rei with the nasty impression it wasn’t the actual danger Viv was in that was ‘unfortunate’ to the general.

“User...User-Unique?” Mayd sounded as lost for words as Rei had ever heard the man. “General... Are you quite sure?”

“Entirely sure, Lieutenant Colonel. I was notified the moment Central caught wind of it. For the last week or so I have had several officers in Sol on specific assignment to monitor the Galens Institute. For good reason, apparently.”

Another silence, though this time Rei couldn’t be sure if it was a lack of response to this particular statement, or simply lingering shock at Abel’s announcement.

For own his part, he was certainly feeling the latter...

A User-Unique Ability. User-Unique. That was... unreal. Utterly and completely unreal. Shido was one thing. As largely unfathomable as the Device was, as constantly

mind-warping as its progress had been over the last half-year, Rei's CAD was in possession of an S-Ranked Growth spec. As impossible a concept as it might be, there was at least some semblance of a tangible reason Shido had made the leaps and bounds it had, and even developed not one but two of its own User-Unique Abilities. Impossible opportunity could lead to impossible outcomes, after all. Yes, Shido was one thing.

But Gemela...

That settled it. That had to settle it. There could no longer be any argument to the contrary. Rei and Aria had already had their suspicions. Shido had already spelled it out for them. 'Shard 1'. 'New link'. 'Manifestation'. And now a User-Unique Ability in a lowly C-Ranked CAD that just happened to be in Rei's orbit?

That settled it.

Aria put words to the conclusion a second before he could.

"Rei..." she whispered, so quietly he barely heard even standing at her elbow as they stared at the grey wall of the room. "It's Shido. It has to be Shido."

He could only barely manage even to nod.

"Do we... Do we know why? Or how, rather?"

Colonel Guest was speaking again from outside in the hall, and he sounded to have steadied himself a little bit following the initial shock.

"The observation team has their suspicions." Abel's voice was still amicable and even, like they were discussing nothing more than the choice of flooring tile under their feet. "Undoubtedly in the same realm of your own, unless I'm overestimating the quality of the staff at Galens. We started taking note of it at Sectionals, after Layton Catchwick and Chancery Cashe's unexpected developments. I had thought the physical manifestation of Laurent's C8 evolution was the cherry on top, but now... well..." there came the sound of a finger tapping on glass again. "Now things are a little different, aren't they?"

Something itched at Rei, at those words. Scraped at him through his shock. He couldn't help but imagine Abel staring through the glass at Viv like his best friend was some fascinating animal at the zoo. He ground his teeth, hands balling into fists at his sides. He wished he could see the woman, wished he had it in him to defy Dent's orders and brave a glance around the frame of the door, to at least get a look at this witch that seemed to be making Viv out to be some kind of specimen that—

But Rei stopped, letting out a quiet “Oh” as a realization popped into his head.

Then he reached out to touch the wall, pulling up the smart-glass options.

“Rei,” Aria hissed under her breath, starting as he moved. “What are you—?!”

He shushed her silently with one finger of his other hand to his lips, though, not looking around as he brought up the display options even as Abel continued outside.

“I commend you, Colonel. I have to admit I did not believe your Institute was willing to push the students under your care to this extent. You're making me wonder if I put my name to Ward and Arada's transfer orders prematurely.”

Rei's hand twitched over the choices he was rapidly scrolling through, but he didn't stop. Not until he found what he was looking for. Mayd had said once that there was a one-way mirror option for the hospital walls, hadn't he? Could that mean there was a similar option that might work?

“... Ma'am?” Guest answered the general like he didn't understand what she was saying.

Come on, Rei hoped silently, still scrolling. Come oooon... There!

He found the button he was looking for and punched it. Without so much as a flicker the wall turned transparent, though not quite as clear as it would have been in window mode. He'd been lucky. One-way glass had been one of the public options accessible, probably for the entertainment and stimulation of bed-ridden patients.

And as a result, he and Aria were suddenly taking in the hall without so much as a glance from any of the now-four people standing outside of Viv's room, not 20 feet from where the two of them were hidden.

Rei didn't know if he'd ever seen Guest or Mayd so tense. They both looked like they were still coping with the absurdity of the news that had just been delivered to them, a little pale as they were, but other than that the pair looked so stiff they might have been standing over the edge of 1000-foot cliff. On the other hand, Dent—standing between them—had a very different expression, a sort of quiet, seething hostility that the captain seemed only barely to be masking behind the features of her full-frame prosthetic.

Rei didn't pay attention to any of them, though. He was too busy taking in what little of the stranger was mostly turned away from him and Aria, one hand still raised to press a single finger ponderously to the clear glass wall of Viv's room, the other casual resting in a fist at the crook of her back.

Shira Abel was no User—there wasn't a hint of a CAD around either wrist Rei could see—but she possessed a powerful presence all the same. A tall, regal woman, her black-and-golds were pristine and her posture twice as clean and sharp as even the officers who had taught the Galens cadets proper military decorum at the start of the year. Her hair was a thick sheet of pure black, only artfully streaked with two narrow white stripes along the side of her head Rei could see, and was cut in a clean line to just above her shoulders to match the straight bangs obvious even in profile. She had light brown skin, and the one eye he could make out was strikingly blue and set over a handsome, straight nose. Despite her age—likely in her 50s, if Rei had to guess—he might have called the woman 'beautiful' were it not for what he could make out of her expression, a look so distinct it clenched at his gut even if he could only see half her face.

He'd been wrong, Rei realized suddenly. He'd thought Abel would be looking at Viv like some petting zoo prize, like some coveted owned thing. He'd thought he'd look on the general and hate her, hate her with a fire already started by the theater of transfer "orders" that Abel had added her signature to earlier that very evening. He'd been wrong. The general wasn't looking at Viv like a caged animal.

She was looking at Viv like a starving soul presented with a feast.

Something cold—so cold it was almost sharp—trickled up Rei's spine, in that moment. He wouldn't realize what it was till later, after he'd return to the dorms and his bed again to lie awake until morning, staring at the ceiling and thinking. In the moment he was too distracted, too intent on listening to the conversation and finding out more about what was going on with Viv, the general, and beyond.

But later, as the dim lights of his room swam eerily against the white cement overhead, he would think back on that instant and know.

Afraid.

For some reason, for some awful reason, looking upon Shira Abel made Rei feel nothing but afraid.

"I was saying I commend you," the general repeated, addressing Guest's hesitant question but still not looking away from Viv. "I'm impressed. As stated, Arada's condition is unfortunate, but the outcome cannot be denied. Had I known the Galens staff had it in the them to push their cadet's to achieve something like this, I might have been more hesitant to agree to the request for—"

"General," Dent's snarl cleaved like a knife across Abel's words. "I must be misunderstanding. It seems like you are implying that the Institute deliberately put Cadet Arada in this position, endangering her health—her life—for... what, exactly?"

By the wall, the general didn't answer, still staring with that ugly, passive hunger. Inside the room, the remaining nurse was now eyeing the four officers nervously,

standing unmoving over Viv's suspended form like some prey animal trying not to catch the attention of the monsters in the hall.

Only after several seconds did Abel finally drop her hand from the glass to join the other at her back, turning to face Guest, Mayd, and Dent with what could only have been a frustrated sigh. Seeing her full-on for the first time, Rei decided that the woman was indeed beautiful, despite the chilling edge of her presence.

When she spoke though, addressing Guest as her keen blue eyes fell on the man, nausea replaced any admiration Rei could grant her appearance.

“Yes... I considered I was giving your staff too much credit on my way over here, Colonel. How unfortunate.” She looked to Dent, her expression as benign and uninterested as anyone Rei had ever seen when taking in the Knight-Class woman. “I stand corrected, Captain. Thank you for pointing that out. I feel better having given my blessing to ensure the future of the assets you currently host at this school. Oh, resent me all you like.” Her voice suddenly took on an edge of impatient fatigue as Dent bristled visibly before the general. “I do not have the luxury to play parent and teacher to the cadets of the ISCM. You can think me callous, I do not care. I have larger things to be worried about than the wellbeing of a single soldier. Frankly—” she lifted her chin to look down her nose a little at the Iron Bishop, taking her in critically “—of all people, I admit, I had hoped you might understand that. Disappointing.”

Rei could see Dent fighting not to let the fury boil over, then, the tinge of white starting the glimmer around the brown of her eyes. Mayd, too, seemed to notice, because even as the captain opened her mouth to answer this, he cut in with only a sidelong glance at Guest.

“General,” the old man wheezed, his tone clear and polite. “I’m afraid I’m a little in the dark. The chief combat instructor as well, I would guess. May I ask what it is you ‘gave your blessing’ to...?”

Abel had looked around at the chief medical officer, apparently about to answer him, when the colonel beat her to it.

“The general—” Guest must have found his strength again, because his words came in a harsh rumble “—is referring to meeting I had this past evening with Cadets Ward and Laurent. A meeting in which we were all regrettably informed that Central Command is considering transferring the pair of them out of the care of the Galens Institute after the end of the year, depending on certain... contingencies...”

There was no pause, this time.

“What?!”

The demand came mirrored from the captain and lieutenant colonel both. Dent—already clearly straddling the edge of the knife that was her own fury—was expectedly snappish, but it was the faintest hint of a snarl in Mayd’s voice that had Rei’s hands going cold. Mayd, the collected, ever-benevolent figure who he never would have guessed was capable of anger. Mayd, the grandfatherly doctor who had always been the calming presence even when the likes of Dent or Ameena Ashton had lost a bit of their cool.

Mayd, who was now staring at Shira Abel with a smoldering displeasure that Rei thought might have set his uniform alight.

And yet again the general didn’t so much as blink at their rage.

“The colonel is at liberty to explain the situation as he sees fit,” she said coolly, not looking away from Guest, her chin still held high. “But yes. Certain concerns were levied against the Galens Institute by the parents of Cadet Aria Laurent. Concerns Central could not easily dismiss, in particular given who her father is. I’m sure you understand.”

“No, General.” Mayd’s voice was still tempered, but there was a seething note that boiled in his answer. “No. We certainly do not. Reidon Ward is not any common cadet. I am positive you are aware of this. Nor is Aria Laurent, in her own right. And I can assure you—perhaps better than anyone standing here—that Ward in particular is

progressing at an as-of-yet incomparable rate to any newly-assigned User the ISCM has ever seen. And I don't just mean his rank. Ward's diagnosis has seen a near-complete resolution since his induction at the Institute. Those symptoms he entered school with have demonstrated an organic reversal, as have the minimal ones he's experienced since. He has the best care the school can provide, and the best instructors it can provide. Why in the MIND's name would you deign to attempt to uproot him from a foundation like—?"

"I will 'deign' to do as I see fit, Lieutenant Colonel. Not for you, not for me, not Galens nor Astra-3 nor even this entire system. For the ISC as a whole, I will 'deign' to do as I see fit."

For the first time Shira Abel's tone had changed in truth. No longer was she placidly addressing the other three in turn as though they were having any typically boorish discussion. No longer was she taking them in one after the other with nothing more than mild disappointment and disinterest. Abruptly the woman's entire aura had shifted, a cold, iron sort of force seeping like venom into her words as she glared openly at Mayd, now. Had she been Dyrk Reese, Rei thought the woman might have tried to leverage her rank, tried to make the lieutenant colonel feel small in the moment. She didn't, though. She didn't have to.

Shira Abel, even lacking a CAD, emanated dangerous conviction so palpable Rei felt Aria tense at his side.

"It is your duty—your responsibility—to see Reidon Ward and those around him as charges in your care. As children, even." Her words were no less steely when she continued. "That is important. I acknowledge it. For the wellbeing of our soldiers and the military as a whole. But it is not my duty." She hissed the statement out like a lash. "My duty runs deeper, Lieutenant Colonel. Much, much deeper. Central Command bears responsibilities I lack not only the words to express, but also the desire to do so if I did. You can keep your bumbling protests. I don't care. They matter as little to me

as the drowned out cries of any single other person in the Collective. I am not here to serve you. I am not here to serve me. I am here to serve the ISC. And I will do so as. I. See. Fit.”

For a few seconds she stared Mayd down. To his credit the old man didn't blink, but he didn't respond either, likely knowing he had already overreached the line of rank and file he should by all rights have been toeing. Abel, for her part, didn't look smug at this lack of answer, didn't seem pleased or even give the sense she had the remotest interest of claiming any sort of victory. On the contrary, she simply stood a little straighter, the looked over her shoulder through the wall at Viv again.

“Besides, as Colonel Guest is already aware, you have made the very points raised by the Laurents. I am not here to besmirch the Galens Institute, Lieutenant Colonel. On the contrary, I give you all the credit you deserve—and more than many in Sol, actually—for having brought Ward this far. For having brought them all this far. But the fact that he is indeed being served by the best Galens has to offer is the problem.” Abel frowned, watching Viv drift gently within the suspension tank, the hem of her gown and the slack of the cables and tubes extending from all over her body drifting around her like she was swaying in a gentle current. “If things were different, I might even fight to keep them where they are. The Institute has done a tremendous job with Reidon Ward. Truly.” She looked back around at Mayd, but then her eyes were past him and sweeping over Guest and Dent both. “Regrettably, it is not a different time, and I have made my decision. Colonel, I believe you are aware of the expectation General Laurent has for the situation?”

“General Laurent’.” Guest repeated in a growl like he were trying not to laugh, both large hands clenched into fists by his sides. “Yes. Of a sort, ma'am.”

Abel nodded. “Good enough. Then there's nothing more to discuss.” She tossed a thumb over her shoulder. “I want daily updates on Arada's condition for my supervisory team. And an immediate notification of when she wakes up.” The woman's

eyes flashed briefly, then something pinged the colonel's own frame. "That's the contact for Chief Warrant Officer Cassidy Maran. She can be your liaison. Clear?"

"Yes, ma'am," came the answer, forced out through clenched teeth.

"Wonderful. Then my job here is done."

And with that—and not so much as a glance at the other two officers—Shira Abel slipped past Guest to head back toward the UTU's entrance, boots clicking over the floor again with quick, confident strides. Rei watched her come, watched her round the nurses station, his eyes unable to leave the general's cool, iron features. She neared the door of the surgical suite they had been hidden away in, then passed it, nearing them with every step.

And then she stopped, coming to a halt directly in front of where Rei and Aria stood on the other side of the wall, and he felt his heart stop.

"I hope there comes a time where you don't think of me as nothing more than a monster," she said. Her voice was high and clear, but apparently not so much so that she was easily heard by the three still standing some 20 feet back around the curve of the hall from her.

"Ma'am?" Guest called stiffly after her, like he hadn't quite heard.

But Shira Abel didn't answer him. Instead she was off again, reaching the UTU's heavy doors in a handful of quick, firm strides, and slipping through them into the hall outside the moment they were opened wide enough to do so.

CHAPTER 5

Dent only gave the transparent wall a glance when the colonel had her retrieve Rei and Aria from the room, raising an eyebrow at them both but not saying a word when she beckoned them out from the doorway. The pair of them barely noticed, dumbstruck as they were even a minute's wait after Abel's exit.

"And now you've had the pleasure of 'meeting' General Shira Abel," the colonel spoke with something like a sigh as they were led back to wall of Viv's room. "Given our discussion this past evening, I'm going to assume you two recognize the name?"

Rei and Aria could only offer unsteady nods of confirmation.

"I would have introduced you, but that may have led to some... unnecessary complications." Guest snorted dryly. "I'm sorry I had Dent dragged you away like that, but I don't think Abel finding the pair of you here would have led to anything good. At least not right now."

Rei found his tongue at last, at that.

"Is she...?" he started uncertainly, still struggling with the layers of complications the encounter had just added to the situation. "Is the general... someone to look out for, sir?"

Rei might have imagined it, distracted as he was, but he thought he caught the three officers all trade a glance at this question as Dent came stand at Guest's right.

"General Abel is... a complicated subject, Cadet." The colonel offered after a second, somewhat carefully. "Toeing the line, I think I can only go as far as to recommend that you and Cadet Laurent avoid crossing paths with her, whenever possible. Not that you should ever have had the occurrence." He frowned around at the doors Abel had left through. "Trying to catch General Laurent, she said? Whether or not that's true, it's a hell of a coincidence."

“You don’t think she...?” Aria started from Rei’s side, eyes wide as she looked from her uncle to Viv still floating in her tank on the other side of the wall, watched now by a much-relieved-looking nurse.

“What? Oh. No, no.” Guest shook his head, then paused before continuing in a grumble as he faced his niece. “She seemed genuinely surprised at the situation. Though not displeased...”

“Sir, she was practically dancing under those black and golds,” Dent all-but-snarled, and Rei again couldn’t help but take note of the anger that Abel seemed to have brought out in the Bishop.

“What a miserable soul,” Mayd mumbled as though in agreement. As the colonel had, he too was watching the UTU doors. “One must feel for her, I think.”

“Must one?” Dent asked with venomous sarcasm.

“Careful, Captain,” Guest warned, turning his attention on her briefly with a frown. “She is still your superior. And to be fair to her, her responsibilities do eclipse those of any of us standing here.”

Dent offered no answer to that, like silence was the best response she had to give. After a second the colonel seemed to decide this was acceptable, because his attention drifted back to Viv and her nurse through the smart glass “... A User-Unique Ability? Unbelievable...”

It made Rei feel a little better about his own shock that Rama Guest could still be so shaken by the news. At the very least, it helped him find his tongue again.

“Sir... Aria and I were saying, while the general was here... About Viv’s Ability... We think that confirms something we’ve been wondering about for a while now...”

The tension returned twice over at his words, though of a different sort that had lingered after Abel’s parting. The three officers—Dent having moved around to stand at Guest’s side so she could face them now—all took in Rei and Aria with an intensity so sharp it was like they were all trying to see through them.

“Yes, you were saying, Cadet,” Mayd pressed gently from their left. “Shido has... ‘linked’ with Gemela, did you say?”

“Yes, sir...” Rei answered uncertainly. “I got the notification about ten minutes before Captain Dent picked us up.”

“Notification?” Mayd repeated, brow furrowing. “Might we request to see that, if you please, Cadet?”

This time, Rei didn’t hesitate, bringing up the very screenshot he had taken for Dent and Aria on their flight from Galens. The captain, sure enough, didn’t do more than frown slightly when he resent it to a channel Guest opened for all five of them standing there, but the colonel and lieutenant colonel respectively both had eyes the size of their fists by the time they’d finished reading—and then rereading—the notice.

“By the MIND...” Mayd was the first to get out. “I certainly had my own suspicions but... By the MIND...”

“Ward, do you know what any of this means?” Guest asked of Rei, though the man was still staring wide-eyed at the picture in his frame. “Other than the obvious.”

“Other than the link with Gemela, sir?”

“That, and the fact that your Device is likely in the process of forming the same with other CADs in your vicinity?”

Rei swallowed at that, at once made only more anxious and relieved by the fact that Guest had clear come to the same conclusion he had in what little opportunity there had been to consider it.

“I would agree with that,” Mayd added. He too was still reviewing the notification when Rei turned to look at him. “Cadet Arada has been nearest to you and your Device the longest, Ward, but my understanding of the situation is that the both of you have been close to Layton Catchwich for some time now. And Cadet Laurent here similarly so.” He gestured towards Aria without looking away from his frame. “If we assume this ‘Shard 1’ link that has formed with Gemela means it is taking up some portion of

whatever that ‘max link capacity’ is, the possibility that it would be taking up the entirety of this percentage value is... remote.”

It was, Rei agreed silently, nodding along. It didn’t seem correct that Gemela’s link would be filling all 62% of the max capacity, whatever that meant. Not when Rei had also been training with Catcher for the better part of half a year, and Aria again for most of that. More likely was that Gemela was taking up some fraction—big or small—of the capacity, while the rest was filled by links that were already in process...

That wasn’t all the evidence they had, though, was it?

“It... may go deeper than that, sir...” Rei said slowly.

Guest blinked at that, finally looking through the notification. “Oh?” he asked slowly.

Not exactly sure how to explain it, Rei took a second.

Enough time to let Aria get bluntly to the point.

“Chancery, sir,” she said quietly. “Cadet Cashe.”

Guest, Dent, and Mayd all frowned at that, then nodded together.

“Cashe,” Guest repeated. “And her Warband...”

At that, at last, he closed out of his NOED and turned his attention in full back on Rei and Aria.

“Tell us everything you know, Cadets,” he ordered steadily. “Everything.”

It didn’t take long for Ward to fill them in on the suspicions he and Laurent had been harboring. In quick order—and with frequent help from Laurent herself—he told the three of the curiosity that had started mounting after Chancery Cashe had developed Warband so oddly close to Layton Catchwick’s earning the Saber’s own rare Ability, Ruinous. At the time they had apparently told themselves the possibility of it

being a coincidence was certainly possible—Cashe and Catchwick both had innate skill and had been putting in an incredible number of extra training hours even outside of class, after all—but after Laurent’s own incredible evolution when she’d hit C8 not a few days later, they had grown more certain. No solid evidence, however, had ever made itself known.

At least not until that evening.

Valera had almost found it in herself to smile a few times, listening to the pair, listening to how they had pieced things together for themselves. They were echoing suspicions she happened to know for a fact a tight circle of the Galen’s higher ups—present company included—had been whispering about for a week now. They weren’t the only ones, either, given Central clearly had their eye on the situation.

Central and... others...

Yeah... Valera didn’t have it in her heart to smile, in the moment. Not when it was taking every ounce of her self control not to let leak out the torrent of other emotions that was already collecting like a building flood in her chest.

As a group they reviewed the alert Ward’s CAD had given him, trying collectively to glean any information that might have been missed in the first dozen passes they’d all made, anything that might provide a better clearer picture as to what was going on. After an extra half-hour theorizing themselves in rapid circles, however, they had gotten no further in their assessment of the situation, with the only conclusions being the ones they’d already come to. Yes, it couldn’t be denied, now, that Shido was indeed interacting with the CADs it had contact with—or at least had the most contact with. What was more, however, that connection was manifesting in some pseudo-tangible way in the form this ‘Shard 1’ that had developed with Gemela.

And, to highlight and evening of impossibilities with an accent of oddness, they all agreed that General Abel lack of mention of this fact meant that—for whatever

reason—Central Command was unaware of the specifics of that development, even despite knowing of Arada’s evolution and Ability before anyone else.

That fact above all else, Valera suspected, was the reason Rama Guest—after ensuring the pair of them hadn’t told anyone else the particulars of Shido’s alert—made the call to order Ward and Laurent to secrecy regarding ‘Shard 1’ and all information relevant to it. The cadets had started to protest, of course, but Guest had been unmoving in his command.

“There is more going on here than any of us are aware of, Cadets,” he had said evenly. “You have to see that. Until we have more information on the situation—and understand why only Ward was the one to be notified about these developments—we have to play it close to the chest. Yes, Ward—” he’d cut the boy off when he opened his mouth to respond “—even from the other members of your squad. I know you understand this already. The gag order when you developed Type Shift was necessary too, if for different reasons, and you followed that. I expect you to do the same here.”

There hadn’t been further arguments on the subject from there—though the two’s grumbled acknowledgements of ‘Yes, sir...’ had been anything but enthusiastic—and Guest had dismissed them all after that, saying he would stay till morning to see if there was any overnight news. This had expectantly triggered an entire new wave of protests from Ward and Laurent—the former in particular all-but-demanding to be allowed to stay in case Arada woke up—and it had been Mayd this time to calm them down, telling them it was unlikely the girl would come to in the next few days, much less that very night. It took the chief medical officer granting special permission for Ward and Laurent—as well as any other member of Firesong who wanted it—to visit Arada on their off time before the two allowed themselves to be begrudgingly led by Valera from the UTU again, leaving Mayd and the colonel as they did.

The higher officers quite conversation as the unit doors swung shut was in sharp contrast to the utter silence the Valera and the cadets walked in as they followed a

hundred different “Exit” signs through the maze of hospital corridors and back out into the night.

The trip back to Galens was just as quiet, with Ward and Arada seemingly working on processing the evening events with difficulty. Again the pair of them held hands as the city lights whipped by past the windows of the flyer Valera had summoned for them, and again she chose not to reprimand them for the public display. For one thing, she thought it reasonable that the pair sought comfort in whatever way they could manage it, given the circumstances.

For another, she was far too lost in her own head to care.

She dropped the cadets off where she’d retrieved them from, in front the of the first year dormitory in the north east corner of the Institute campus. She’d though one or both of them would have some final question to pose to her as they parted ways, perhaps, but instead Ward and Laurent both only offered her tired salutes as they all stepped out of the flyer together, looking utterly exhausted as they turned away to trod in a defeated sort of way the last few yard to Kane’s front doors. Valera watched them go, feeling the ache of fatigue behind her own eyes as the cadets vanished into the building. She ignored it, though, just as she ignored the temptation to clamber right back into the flyer and have it take her straight to the staff housing block where her bed was waiting.

She needed a clear head, and winter air would do her good for that.

She dismissed the flyer with a few quick eye commands, then watched as the vehicle ripped away skyward again to disappear into the shifting lines of Castallon’s nighttime traffic high, high above her. Even then she stood for a moment, though, fighting with herself and mounting pressure that had been building all night in her gut.

She lost the battle about a minute after the final faint echoes of the flyer faded off the distant walls of the Institute.

Valera barely made it to the edge of the path in time, as her stomach heaved. Even with her Speed engaged she only just managed to get sick into the leafless bushes that lined the walkway that led up the to dormitory, vomiting into the brush rather than her shoes. Once, twice, three times she threw up, her body seeming to want to expell everything inside it like the act could rid herself of ill, heartwrenching feeling of guilt weighing down on her shoulders.

Guilt... and anger.

“M-MIND!” Valera snarled into the night once she’d gained control of her gut again, standing straight once more to wipe her mouth clean with a sleeve of her jacket.

The red text lit up her NOED at once, like it had been waiting for her to call on it.

An unfortunate outcome, I admit. The likelihood that Cadet Arada would push herself to such an extreme was low, as I stated.

“Apparently no low enough!” Valera only barely kept herself from screaming, hands balled into iron fists by her sides. She could feel the familiar warmth behind her her irises, and she knew her eyes were glowing white hot.

She didn’t care.

“This is what I was afraid of!” she seethed aloud. “This is why I didn’t want to give her permission! She was desperate, and desperate has no place on the field!”

Captain, it could be argued that ‘desperate’ is all we have left, the red text answered. And I do hope you are not concerned about exposure. I was very careful in applying the necessary permissions, as prove by Lieutenant Colonel Mayd’s search coming up empty. I will likewise take the necessary steps to ensure that Viviana Arada does not make the mistake of naming you when she—

“I don’t give a damn, about my exposure!” Valera snapped, not even bothering to finish reading the MIND’s arguement. “You think that’s what I care about?! Arada is

in the hospital in critical condition! She could wake up with brain damage! And that's if she wakes up at all!"

A line of green joined the conversation, now.

The likelihood of that is extremely small, Valera. From the data I was able to gather while we were at Altmore, I would estimate the chance of Viviana Arada suffering longterm damage that would prevent her from continuing her training as a User to be less than 3%.

"Stay out of this, Kes," Valera snarled. "That's half the problem, anyway. You—both of you—you don't understand. You can't understand. Maybe one day, when you have enough damn data, but until then you just don't get that humans are more than numbers and equations and percentages! We're more than a mathematical breakdown of what is likely and not! I told you I didn't want to give Arada permission! I told you something like this would happen! I don't care what values and sum you applied to the situation! There is more to people than your damn algorithms!"

She finished, and for a moment there came no answer. Some small part of her appreciated that, in a way. The two AIs could communicate as quickly as they could think, after all, so any pause provided at moments like these were typically for her benefit.

That didn't make them human, though.

Captain. The MIND answered, and for some reason Valera couldn't help but read the words like they were hard said. I am merely doing what I have to, with the tools I have, to the very best of my ability.

The anger drained from Valera all at once, at that. In a heartbeat, however, it was replaced it, and by a myriad of feeling she would have traded back for the fire in a second. Grief, frustration, betrayal.

Disappointment.

“I know,” she answered sadly, turning to start the long walk back towards the staff housing through the frigid winter night. “But until you understand that we have to be more than ‘tools’ to you, MIND, then you aren’t much better than Shira Abel...”

CHAPTER 6

PLACEHOLDER

-PLACEHOLDER

Dammit!

Emmaline von Bor was being pressed like she'd never been before on the battlefield, and she was anything but pleased about it. The survivors of Blackmaw had closed in quickly after Janice had shouted that she was going down, moving to surround Emmaline with well-honed efficiency. From three sides now they came charging out of the canopy into the clearing where she'd been caught while looking for a place to make her stand, dark shapes ripping out from the cover of the trees like the shadows themselves had come alive.

With nothing left to do otherwise, Emmaline ground her steel boots into the earth, securing her footing as she shouted in the enemy's face.

“COME ON THEN!”

As Blackmaw closed the distance, she twisted and swung Theoknight's great spear in a massive circle, forming a defensive ring around her position. The move brought two of her opponents up immediately, the largest pair—Dembi and Sorret—ripping through grass and earth to stop short before they got themselves cleaved in two, the spear's wide blade leaving a glowing trail of red behind it even in the sunlit day exactly where they would have been otherwise.

The third, though, was a Josephson, and the Duelist slipped under the Device with the grace of wind through leaves.

Emmaline took the chance.

Rounding on this slighter opponent, she rocketed forward, aiming to surprise the woman by meeting her head on. Josephson, quick as a rat, slipped sideways, the red vysetrium of her two grey-green blades slashing out. She'd chosen to dip to the left, though, trying to stay clear of Emmaline's main hand.

Unfortunately for her, any good Phalanx knew that their blade was hardly the only weapons they had.

CLANG!WHAM!

Emmaline caught both swords with her round shield, the blades gauging deep into the solid white steel. At the same time, she planted and changed her momentum in a flash only possibly with A-Ranked Speed, a rare blessing she'd been granted given her Type. Her Defense numbers were a bit lower than usual by comparison, but as an A6 Emmaline had long since learned to play to her advantages.

They allowed her to do things like take the hit *and* plow into Josephson full on, ramming through her twin blows to slam bodily against the woman, shield still leading the way.

The sound of shattering metal accompanied the impact as Josephson was sent rocketing away into the forest again, her upper back striking a tree so hard she went spinning like a top to vanish back into the underbrush and shadows. Emmaline saw a glimpse of broken steel glimmering like a trail of grey-green rain after the woman, but didn't wait to watch it land as she whirled.

Theoknight's shield came up just in time to ring like a gong as it blocked a steel-clad fist the size of a small boulder that had been aimed at the back of her head.

Not having had the time to set her feet, Emmaline allowed the strike to launch her backwards in much the same fashion she'd just sent Josephson flying. Instead of vanishing into the trees, though, she tucked and rolled, careful to keep her spear well in hand as she did. The moment she was able to she pressed up off the shield, shoving herself in the air, and with a heavy somersault landed on her feet in a crouch that allowed her to rip forward again almost as soon as she touched the ground, seeking to take the her remaining opponents, too, by surprise.

Unfortunately, her rare dexterity had already been adjusted for.

CRASH!

Dembi, the Brawler who'd sent her flying back, was a big guy at something like six-and-a-half feet tall or so, but he was a *pipsqueak* compared to Sorret, the Mauler who'd jumped in her way to shield his teammate from 'dying' the exact same way the Josephson had. Instead of another clean bodyblow, Emmaline's shield struck awkwardly against the diagonally-held haft

of a massive, black and purple hammer that had been held at the ready, its heavy, cylindrical head glowing blue with intricate patterns that weren't obvious at a glance.

Emmaline, unfortunately, got to see them up close and *very* personal when Sorret—having successfully weathered her surprise countercharge—twisted his weapon down and in to catch her full in the temple with that vysetrium-lined head.

As a User steadily closing in on that oh-so-coveted S-Rank, Emmaline's Device encased every square inch of her body in steel and vysetrium. It was a little silly to consider how one *looked* when their CAD was called, by Emmaline had to admit she took great pride in Theoknight's manifested appearance, a chivalric style reminiscent of her famous grandmother's. The Device even had something like a tower helm, complete with a plume-like extension of flowing light that usually glowed orange, as did the four slashes across the faceplate that looked like slots in a visor. Right now they were the red Bannerhall had been assigned at match commencement, but against the white and gold of the armor Emmaline was sure Theoknight looked striking just the same.

Had she had a moment to consider it, she might have thought that wouldn't be so true after the hammer smashed half that proud helm in as she was slammed down into the ground with so much force she literally felt the earth give under her heavy body.

Not that that meant Emmaline was close to done.

Her Defense specs might be lower for a Phalanx of her rank, but Theoknight was still good at taking hits. Even as she heard the Mauler shifted above in what had to have been preparation for a killing blow, Emmaline jerked her spear up and around, sweeping the ground half-blindly. There was an ugly *thunk* as she felt it connect hard with someone's ankles, but she was already wrenching herself out of the divot she'd made in the grass to roll backwards and away, coming up just in time to meet Dembi's fist yet again while Sorret rolled back on to his feet from the ground behind the Brawler. She would have liked to ignore the red text in the corner of her screen that told her she'd been 'injured', and usually would have.

The fact that she only seemed to be able to see out of one eye, though, forced Emmaline to glance at the notifications even as she ceded more ground to Mauler.

Left orbital socket damage registered.

Concussion registered.

Applying appropriate physiological restriction.

Emmaline cursed again, seeing the end coming in truth, now. She'd had the *slimmest* of chances when she'd suddenly found herself with three-to-one odds, especially after she'd managed to take out Josephson. Now, though, she was blind in one eye—her shield-side eye—basically severing her defensive abilities at the knee.

All that was left, she supposed, was making as good a show for herself and Bannerhall as she could.

Which meant calling on the one ace she still had in hand, even if the timing wasn't ideal.

Ducking a swing from the Brawler, Emmaline rolled to the right, then bolted between the closest pair of trees. She heard one of the men shout in surprise at this sudden change in tactic, then two sets of steel boots chasing after her into the forest.

Exactly as she hoped.

Emmaline planted, whirled, and whipped her arm around to launch her shield like a discus at the Blackmaw fighters. With only one good eye her aim should by all rights have been off, but ten thousand practice calls over the last 2 years made the motion more instinct than action as the shield ripped through the air right at the pair. To their credit, it was immediately clear the squad had made as much a study of Emmaline and her teammates as Bannerhall had of them when another shout of warning Dembi and Sorret split apart, shooting off to the left and right.

It didn't save the Brawler.

Bowfall! Emmaline thought with intent, focusing on the shield that just happened to have flown closest to the smaller man.

There was a low *crack*, and the spinning wall of circular steel suddenly split and scattered into no less than ten identical triangular slivers. For a fraction of a second they flew away from each other, scattered by the centrifugal force, but then in mirrored unison they stopped in midair. For a heartbeat they stayed like that, frozen.

And then, in a blur of red, the angular slivers snapped around and shot point-first after the cursing Brawler even as he continued to flee into the woods, hounding after him like unforgiving arrows given a life all their own.

Emmaline, pleased with the outcome as she was, didn't even have time to grin before Sorret realized he wasn't the hunted and came charging at her through the trees with all the power of a train.

In maybe 15 seconds the two traded a hundred blows, Sorret swinging his hammer in thundering blurs, Emmaline using the advantage of her slightly improved reach to keep the man at bay as best she could. Even blind in one eye and lacking her shield, she wasn't anywhere close to being ready to give it. Josephson was out, and Bowfall was a relentless and rare Ability unique to only to a very few Phalanxes, a far superior version of the more-common Magnetic Hunt. While her broken shield wouldn't return to her after the fact, she didn't have to keep her focus trained on the Ability to hold it active. Dembi would chased around the field endlessly until he smashed all ten of her arrows, or fell to them. Which meant that if she could just take down Sorret, Emmaline might hold the advantage again.

Unfortunately, with every clash the pair had, her hopes quickly slipped away again.

Sorret was about as slow as most Maulers—if you could call what was likely mid-B-Ranked Speed 'slow'—but on to of being undeniably skilled with his hammer, he also seemed to boast a shockingly high Defense. Four times, Emmaline manage just to get her spear in for a shallow blow, and four times she nearly lost her head as her spear glanced off the man's armor like water off glass, leaving her momentarily open for a counter strike she only barely avoided each time. As a fifth thrust slipped off the black steel around his thigh, Emmaline cursed and launched herself back, realization dawning. The emulated concussion applied to her by the Arena was clearly doing it's job, because she'd completely forgot about the Mauler's own rare Ability, one that was a *lot* less obvious than something like Bowfall.

Ghost Shell. A buildup of electromagnetic energy released in countless tiny microbursts around a User's armor. Each pulse was million times less powerful than the eruption caused by some offensive Abilities that used a similar premise, like Repulsion, but the result was just

as effective it its own right. A massive boost in Defense, making the User virtually invulnerable to everything but the most direct of blows.

Worse of all, it could be held up for almost a full minute by a talented User.

As quickly as she could Emmaline retreated, doing her best to avoid the trunks and roots and stones as she kept glancing over her right shoulder even in her haste, hating the feeling of being half-blind while she ran out a dangerous clock. Sorret's footfalls rumbled after her, the Mauler barrelling *through* the trees more often than he bothered to go around them, each impact announced by an explosion of noise and rain or shrapnel. It was no use. He would catch her. Maybe Emmaline could pull off a pike maneuver, planting her spear in the hopes of letting Sorret run himself through? No, the ground was too soft, and it would be obvious if she set the butt of her weapon against the tree. She could turn and flee outright, or at least until the clock ran out on Ghost Shell? Also no, since she was probably already pushing her luck with the match arbiter as it was with all the backpedalling she was doing. Plus Emmaline *bated* the idea of turning tail as much as any User. In that case what if she—?

Sblunk!

With an impact that took her breath away, Emmaline hit something solid and unyielding. In the same moment, pain exploded from her back and abdomen, so intense and so sudden that she gasped in shock as her retreat was cut abruptly short. Her entire body spasm, and with the agony came a wash of weakness, bringing her to her knees as Theoknight's spear spilled from her limp grass to hit the ground with a dense *thud* right beside her. She jerked, and more by chance than intent she found herself squinting in confusion at a blurred line of blue light that was sticking out of her stomach.

Vysetrium, her foggy mind connected finally, realizing the glow edge the green and grey steel of a familiar-looking sword.

Crap, was Emmaline's last thought as she shakily looked over her shoulder one last time, *Grammy's gonna kill me for this...*

She would deserve it, of course. She was the one, after all, who had assumed Josephson was down and out.

And it had cost her a sword in the back, held unsteadily in the Duelist's one good hand, the other arm limp and useless as it hung beside the shattered remains of the armor that had once encased the woman's torso.

Then Sorret was on her, and a blaze of blue came down on her head.

"All Red Team 'Bannerfall' combatants eliminated," the Arena announced as noise returned in a rushing roar to the stadium. "Winner: Blue Team 'Blackmaw'."

"Maaaaaan I *really* thought we had them," Janice Payne whined good naturedly some five minutes later, rapping her knuckles against her forehead in frustration, as was her odd habit. "I *know* it was an off match, but I *really* thought we had them."

"It was a good fight," Guihua Li assured her with a comforting pat on the shoulder, his accented voice warm as he smiled. "A very good fight. And it is not a loss we should be ashamed of."

"At all!" little Heather Murphy, a rarity in the SCTs by being the shortest of their six of them by nearly a foot, piped up eagerly, her crimson curls bouncing as she punched the air in front of her. "Their average rank was like *four* levels higher than ours! *And* they had Boston on their team! A Pawn-Class!"

"One we managed to bring down. Yes. That *was* a good fight, and I think we all deserve to feel good about ourselves even *if* it wasn't a win."

As one, Bannerfall all turned inward to look at Jackson Queen, even Emmaline and Tom, who'd both been quiet since coming down from the Madrid Arena's main floor. They stood in the underworks now, the double-wide loop a straight corridor all colored blue, red, and gold, having claimed a second of the inside wall some 20 yards up from the ramp entrance. While the rest of them were standing in a rough circle in various resigned or disappointed, Jackson was leaning casually against the wall, arms crossed and a smile playing at his handsome features as he looked around at them. His long, platinum hair was swept over one shoulder, and his blue-green eyes were bright despite the loss.

“To be completely honest, I couldn’t be happier with that fight,” he told them warmly. “I know some of you guys are a little bummed—” Emmaline got the distinct impression he deliberately didn’t look at her or Tom as he said this “—but the reality is that match was *always* going to be hellish, and we kicked ass despite that. We managed to work as a team, got Boston down inside of two minutes just like we planned, *and* put up a hell of a fight.”

“We only managed to down three of them...” Tom muttered, his gaze falling to the floor. “Largely my fault, too.”

“Tom, you ran into Boston *and* Josephson in the first *five* seconds of the fight. *And* you managed to injure Boston’s hand before you went down.” Jackson shook his head with a chuckle, like the Saber was joking at his own expense. “That’s a perfect storm of bad luck and opportunity. *Any* of us would have been FDAed in that situation, and probably not before we got a hit on on the *Pawn*-Class Lancer.”

There was a muttering of agreement at this, and Janice dropped her hand from her forehead—now had a distinct red mark from knocking against it—to peer at Jackson,

“See? *That’s* why you got assigned as squad leader. Cause you can say shit like that. I would have just been like ‘Cheer up, dude. We’ll get ‘em next time’ or something. Can’t believe you tried to turn down the assignment when they offered it to you.”

Before Jackson could answer this, however, Li poked Janice in the cheek with a finger, looking down at her reproachfully.

“Janice, have I ever told you have all the grace of a boulder.”

“Wazzat supposed to mean??”

Heather and Jackson both sniggered as the pair started bickering playfully, and even Tom managed to pull off the shadow of a grin. Emmaline, though, just couldn’t bring herself to laugh with the rest of her squad, and eventually got tired of frowning at the ground.

“I’ve got a match in an hour,” she cut across the banter, trying as hard as she could not to give away the disappointment that was like a bad taste in her mouth. Turning from the group, she started to head down the hall. “I’m going to warm down and get my head on straight.”

“Emmaline, hold on.”

Unwillingly she stopped, half turning and forcing herself to meet Jackson's bright eyes. The squad leader had moved away from the wall at last, stepping after her.

"You did good," he told her firmly, as serious as he'd been since they'd lost. "No, you did *great*. Three-on-one, and you nearly took two of them down. You almost clutched the match, all on your own."

Emmaline didn't say anything.

Jackson tried to wait her out, but gave up pretty quickly.

"I'm just saying," he said with a sigh, "that you tend to be too hard on yourself."

"We're out of the running," Emmaline answered him, still working hard to keep her voice gentle. "It was only our third match, and we're out."

"Girl this is the *Sol* Systems," Janice said with a laugh. "And we've only been fighting together for like six months! We're doing great!"

You think so? Emmaline thought privately, hating herself just a little bit for it.

"Yeah. Yeah I know," she said instead, turning away again to start down the tunnel once more, lifting a hand to wave back. "I'll catch you guys in a bit. Later."

Mercifully, no one called after her again.

She felt like an ass the minute she was away from them, of course. She'd expected to, and yet still hadn't been able to help herself. They *were* doing great, it was true. Earth events were notoriously intense—unsurprising given the pedigree of military schools scattered around the planet—and while the Madrid Winter Tourney was an independent even outside of the standard qualifying circuit, they *had* come out on top of their two first matches, both of which had also been less than in their favor. At A6, Emmaline was tied with Jackson as the strongest fighter on Bannerfall, while all around them there was *plenty* of squads with A8s or 9s, and even a few with S-Ranked fighters like Blackmaw's Boston. They'd given a good showing of themselves in the Team Battles, were still in the Wargames bracket, and four of them were also left in the Duels, with only Li and Tom having been dropped the day before.

And yet...

Grinding her teeth, Emmaline turned a corner in the underwork tunnels, then headed straight for the nearest stairs up.

She did not, as she'd lied to her team about, head to the Arena subbasements to warm down. Instead she popped out onto the walkway again and into the roar of the 100,000-seat stadium. Immediately turned right, she headed for the center of the longer east-side of the stands. She didn't even notice the two Team Battles that were happening on either side of the main floor, not seeing much more as she excused her way through the mass of fighters and spectators that crowded their path. It took her a minute but eventually she reached the steps she'd been aiming for—a wider set than most of the other that led up into the seats, detailed with decorative iron railings—and breaking out of the throng took the steps two at a time. It was a short climb, only three or four stories, and the stairs ended along the side of an oblong, handsome viewing box that jutted out from the stands some fifty feet. The door, iron again, and beautifully carved with what looked like motifs depicting the ruins of old Madrid, were guarded by a single ISCM officer standing at ease before them, a sergeant who Emmaline knew had watched her climb the whole way up.

It wasn't like many other people were using the stairs, given the nature of the person who'd rented the box.

An obligatory security scan followed, then the sergeant stepped smartly aside, pressing his hand to a flat plate of smart-glass set into the wall just behind him. If the doors made any noise as they opened, it was lost to the roar of the crowds, and Emmaline only gave the officer a brief nod of thanks before she stepped quickly inside, letting them seal shut behind her.

She found herself grateful, as they did, that the dampening tech shut out almost all noise. Even the sounds of the fights—which usually would have been selectively allowed through for the occupant's pleasure—had been muted.

The silence was bliss, even if it only lasted a second.

“So... How do you think that fight went, Emmy?”

At the viewing glass, her back to the door, an old woman in a white business suit stood watching the Team Battles below. Her hair, braided along the back of her head in a severe plate, had been allowed to grow naturally gray with time, and her hands were spotted and wizened where they rested atop a plain wooden cane that she stooped ever-so-slightly into. It

made Emmaline sad, noticing that slow bend. It was a new development, the telltale sign of the unstoppable passage of time even Users couldn't escape forever.

Then again, Emmaline also knew better than anyone that the woman was still more—far, *far* more—than the old, plodding figure she so often showed the world. Even her constant muttering about 'not understanding the technologies of modern times' was a sham, she knew.

It was easier to get the world to leave you alone if you presented it with a less-interesting version of yourself, after all.

"I think we could have won," Emmaline answered the question promptly, moving to stand behind the old woman and putting her hands on her hips. "And I think it's my fault we lost."

The woman nodded slowly, still not looking back. "Agreed. Bannerfall lost. And it *is* because of you."

Those words, from anyone else, would have stung.

Instead, Emmaline only waited.

"But what do we say about losing?"

"That there's no such thing. There is only winning, and there is learning."

This time, Emmaline was answered with a chuckle and at last the woman turned from the window to face.

Smiling, as she did, as only a grandmother taking in a favor grandchild could.

"Exactly," Serena von Bor said earnestly, her black eyes, tinged with the hint of speckled gold, flashing with excitement. "Then learn with me. What did you do wrong?"

At the question, Emmaline felt something almost like relief come over her. This, *this* was what she needed. She could appreciate Jackson's tact. She could appreciate Janice's gruff humor, and Li's kind words. They worked, at least most of the time, for most anyone else.

But Emmaline had been raised a different way.

"Josephson was the critical mistake. A hit like that would usually have been an FDA for a Duelist, even A8. Or at least eventually fatal from internal organ damage. I assumed."

“And it cost you, yes.” Her grandmother nodded solemnly, the black vysetrium along the bands of her CAD, the famous Parzival, fleshing against their white and gold steel. “So... How would you redo that part of the fight?”

Emmaline had had the answer ready for 10 minutes now, and it felt good to finally let it lose.

“I should have followed Josephson in. I already had the momentum, and there was still some space between me and the other two. If I’d followed her in, I would have had a clean FDA on her—or at least confirmation—*and* additional coverage from the trees against Dembi and Sorret.”

Her grandmother nodded along, looking pleased with this breakdown. Still, she obviously wasn’t done.

“Aside from Josephson, there are other advantages to that play. What else?”

Again, Emmaline was already ready for the question.

“It likely would have resulted in an identical situation, but I wouldn’t have been injured. If I’d followed Josephson in and Dembi and Sorret came in after me, it would have been the same position as when I retreat into the woods after Sorret hit me. I could still have triggered Bowfall, but Josephson would have been dead, and I wouldn’t have had any restrictions.”

“And how much of a difference would that have made in the fight?”

Emmaline’s hands balled into fists on her hip, her frustration getting the better of her again.

“As much as all of it.”

“Precisely,” her grandmother agreed curtly. “Maybe you would have gone down just the same. Without a shield, a Phalanx is at a steep disadvantage, after all. *But* you would have *positioned* yourself into a one-one-one fight, instead of having been forced into it in response to injury. Placing yourself in harms way can be advantageous.

“But being put there rarely is,” Emmaline finished for the old woman, nodding herself as she relaxed, crossing her arms over the gold emblem of the ISCM emblem on her chest. “Yeah... Youd’ think I’d have learned that by now...”

In answer, her grandmother chuckled, stepping towards her. When she was close enough, she reached out and patted Emmaline's cheek fondly. Her touch was comforting, but also strange, her frail appearance betrayed by the subtle strength of in this gnarled fingers, the power in that hand that was impossible to completely hide.

"Learning isn't something we ever finish doing, Emmy," she said warmly. "Ever. Yes, Bannerfall lost. Because of you. But also because Tom ran into misfortune, because Jackson made a bad call sending in Janice when Li was fighting Boston, because Li made a mistake that got him down. Each of you is the reason, as much as any other. Don't shy from that. *Learn* from it."

"Yes, Grammy," Emmaline answered softly, feeling her shoulders finally loosen, her frustration dissipating at last. After a second, she took a deep breath, then tried to push all her disappointment into it as she forced it out again.

Then she met her grandmother's eyes evenly.

"You know, you don't have to come to *every* one of my tournaments..."

The last of the teacher's facade fell away, at that, and her grandmother snorted. "You're right. How silly of me. I should be dawdling around my empty house all day, knitting stockings and drinking bad tea. Maybe I'll finally gave and look into that crossword subscription your grandfather keeps trying to get me for my birthdays."

"Maybe if you'd stopped pretending not know how to use your NOED and tried it, you might enjoy it," Emmaline retored with a little bit of a grin. "Gramps *does* know you pretty well..."

Her grandmother scoffed, waving the comment away.

"Please. *Crosswords*. I ask you." She snorted, turning to move slowly back to the viewing window, where the Team Battles seemed to both be wrapping up. "No. I'd rather be hear. I *like* cheering on my only granddaughter, thank you very much. Honestly, I remember when you were as tall as my cane, and you swore up and down every day how one day you'd join the SCTs and—"

“Aaaaand *pass* on the family nostalgia!” Emmaline cut the woman off loudly, throwing both arms up in a big X above her head. “I’m good on death-by-embarrassment today, thanks Grammy!”

Her Grandmother grinned over her shoulder at her.

“Then prove it. Make that last fight up to yourself in your next Dual. Deal?”

“Deal,” Emmaline answered with her own smile, filing a thousand times lighter than she had when she’d started climbing the stairs to the box. “Watch me.”

Her grandmother only nodded this time, eyes back on the Arena floor below.

Emmaline had just turned, taking her first step back towards the box door, when her frame lit up with call notification. She stopped short, frowning at the “CALLER UNKNOWN” that took up her NOED all of a sudden, a rare occurrence in an age of interwoven technology and system-spanning relationships.

“Hello...?” She asked tentatively, picking up the line, figuring it was probably a match promoter or tournament agent she didn’t know yet.

She was surprised, therefore, when a woman’s husky voice greeted her smoothly, lacking that usual pep and energy unique to marketers and fight solicitors.

“Warrant Officer von Bor, my name is Ueno Jasper. I have little doubt you have no idea who I am, for which I do apologize.”

The woman’s voice—Jasper’s, apparently—held the slight accent of an east asian decent, and Emmaline though she recognized the family name as Japanese.

“No... I don’t...” Emmaline said cautiously. “Can I... help you?”

“You can. Immensely, in fact. Again, I *do* apologize but... I have it on good authority your grandmother doesn’t usually take calls, so I decided that this was the best alternative.” Emmaline could hear a smile in that voice now. “Could I bother you terribly to pass this line along to her? I would be in your dept.”

Emmaline blinked, half in astonishment, half in disbelief. Frowning, she cocked her head in confusion as she turned back to face her grandmother, who’d looked away from the window once more to listening with a quizzical look.

“I’m sorry,” Emmaline spoke like she didn’t quite follow. “You called to reach my... grandmother?”

“I did.” No further apology, this time.

“And you want me to... pass this line along to her...?”

“If you please.”

Emmaline frown deepened.

“You’re crazy, lady,” she said tersely. “My grandmother is a billion miles away right now, and even if she wasn’t there’s no way in *hell* I’d connect you. Lose this number, and don’t you *dare* try to—”

“Warrant Officer, please be aware that if you want to play this game, I happen to be very, *very* good at it. Not only am I aware that you are both at the Madrid Winter Tourney, right now, I am *also* aware that you are currently standing in the same room.” The smile was still there, in that voice. “Now, of course, I am not one to come to negotiations with nothing but a stick. Would you be so kind as to pass along a message, before you hang up on me? If your grandmother wants nothing to do with this call after that, I will understand and move on to our second choice.”

Emmaline stood silent for a second, completely taken aback. Outside on the Arena floor, the Team Battles had finally ended, with the winners and losers scurrying away towards the underworks to make space for whatever fights came next.

On the other side of the line, Ueno Jasper took advantage of the lapse in response.

““The prince has a shield, now’,” she said simply. “Please tell your grandmother that. If she is *half* as well informed as I’m led to believe, she should understand.”

““The... the prince has a... shield, now’?” Emmaline repeated, more out of total confusion than any intention to pass the message along.

Inadvertent or not, though, the stranger on the phone got her wish.

“Emmy!” Her grandmother’s voice was sharp, and the old woman was standing in front of her in a blink, all semblance of any worn, aging soul gone from her face. “Who are you talking to?”

Again Emmaline blinked, though the surprise this time had nothing to do with Ueno Jasper.

“She... she wants to talk to.... you?” she got out by way of answer, struggling to follow what was going on. “She said she knows you don’t usually take calls and... and she knows weren’t standing in the same room...”

There was a flash, then. A dark, dangerous flash in her grandmothers eyes, a glimpse of black so utter it was like looking into an empty void. Instinctively Emmaline’s entire body tensed up, a cold lance of an old fear she’d only rarely experienced in the presence of the woman cutting up her spine.

Then the black was gone, and her grandmother’s sharp gaze was clear again.

“Pass the call to me,” she said firmly.

“What??” Emmaline demanded, coming to her sense again at this question. “Grammy, no. Come on. She’s probably some—”

“Emmaline. Pass. The call. To me.”

Her grandmother’s words were clear, calm and even, but they resonated with a force that felt like it was digging into Emmaline’s very bones. Without another word she did as she was told, triggering the transfer with several shaky gestures of one hand.

The notice hit her grandmother’s frame, lighting her eyes up with the rare sight of her NOED coming fully alive, and the old woman accepted it with a blink.

“This is von Bor,” she said, her voice still filled with that subtle weight, so soft and yet so heavy Emmaline thought the walls around them might crack at any second. “Speak.”

For almost a minute, the two of them stood in silence then, Emmaline watching her grandmother with mouth open, the old woman in turn listening to whatever words Jasper Ueno had for her. In that time, though, something astounding happened.

Slowly, like gravity was releasing its hold on her, her grandmother stood straight again, every passing second seeing her rise a little taller as her eyes grew more and more intense.

By the time she spoke, there wasn’t so much as a shadow of the ‘Grammy’ left before Emmaline to recognize. In a place, a woman who might have been made of sharpened iron

stood, gaze alert and intent, the cane in both her hands more like a sword now than anything else.

“Oh yes,” the Ivory Shield, Rook-Class Champion of the Sol System, growled into the silence of the box, her mouth a cool, keen smile. “Yes. If your ‘prince’ is involved... I am indeed most *certainly* interested...”

CHAPTER 7

PLACEHOLDER

-PLACEHOLDER

Rei wasn't sure he could remember a time when he'd felt so drowningly miserable.

He'd had ample cause of unhappiness in his life, sure. He'd been in pain for as long as he could remember, his fibro diagnosis a constant source of suffering that had only ever rarely been less than general discomfort, and not infrequently as much as absolute agony. On top of that, before Galens there'd been a period of years where he'd never had many friends, his social circles trending towards the sort to prefer to exclude and mock him rather than make any effort to bring him into their fold even in the most minimal of ways. He'd been small—*was* small still, by most standards—and weak, and his innumerable scars—almost impossible to hide completely—had always made him an outsider and an easy target. In fact, after leaving Astra-1 and the sheltering comforts of the Estoran Children's Center where he'd been raised, Rei was pretty sure his future *should* have been one of general misery and discontent with life and limb.

But then, within his first couple weeks at Grandcrest Preparatory, Viviana Arada shoved her pretty face in between his and the pad he'd been studying a Globals match on, demanded to know what he was watching... and the fates had somehow lost their hold of his intended thread.

And now...

“Viv... The hell were you *thinking*...?”

He hadn't meant to say the words out loud, but considering it Rei wasn't sure he could have held them back even if he'd wanted to to. A boiling of emotions was making a mess of his stomach, and they slipped free like the churn of guilt, fear, and anger had shoved the sentiment out if only to make room for more of their own kind. He certainly didn't feel any *better*, expressing the frustration.

Then again, the slim hand that took him lightly by the elbow, stopping him as he'd been automatically heading for the elevators, was a different matter altogether.

He turned to look at Aria, who'd been just as quiet as he had for the duration of their return flight to school. They were standing in the lobby of Kanes again, the dim black and red aesthetic a comforting, homey warmth all around them. It made meeting his girlfriend's green eyes a little easier to bear, especially seeing those shattered emeralds tinged with the red of what he suspected were tears forcibly left unshed.

"Don't blame her, Rei..." Aria's voice was subdued, made clear only by the silence of the lobby. "Please. I... I know it's easy to, but... Please don't blame her..."

Rei stared at her, momentarily at a loss. Then he registered exactly what he'd said, and he let out a laugh. It was a harsh, mirthless thing, but it got out all the same, bubbling up like the frustration had before it.

"What's funny?" Aria asked a little defensively, letting go of his elbow with a frown. Before her hand had dropped completely to her side, though, Rei caught it.

"No. Nothing," he told her quickly, squeezing her fingers in apology. "I'm sorry. Nothing's funny. As much as I wish it was. It's just..." He sighed, giving himself a second to look for the words. "Aria... I *wish* I could blame Viv. It *is* her damn fault. It really *is*..."

Aria didn't pull her hand away from his, but she was still frowning. "Maybe, but that that doesn't—"

"Help anything right now," Rei finished for her with another sigh. "I know. It's half the reason I'm having trouble putting this on her."

"And the other half?"

Rei hesitated.

"Reidon Ward," Aria started to growl, her fingers suddenly hard as steel in his hand, "don't you *dare*."

Rei blinked at her in surprise.

Then he almost—*almost*—grinned.

"I'm *still* not convinced you can't read my mind," he muttered, trying at another—hopefully a little more genuine—laugh.

Aria clearly wasn't finding anything funny.

“I don’t *have* to be psychic when it’s written all over your face,” she almost growled, eyes ablaze. “You’re looking for a way blame *yourself* for this, aren’t you? I can’t believe this. Rei, it’s not your *fault*.”

“I know.”

Rei’s answer was as calm. It was actually harder to get out than he expected, but he managed it, meeting Aria’s eyes evenly as she paused to watch him warily.

“I know,” he said again. “I’m not trying to blame myself, I promise. If anything, it’s the opposite. I’m looking for a way *not* to, because it’s *not* my fault.”

It took a second, but eventually Aria’s lost her fire, her expression fauling into something more like concern than anger.

“It’s not anyone’s,” she pressed, more gently now, like she wanted to build on momentum she’d been surprised to find. “Or maybe it’s a little bit of everyone’s. But it’s not *yours*...”

Rei nodded. “I know, yeah. Still... Not pointing fingers is easier said than done...” He felt his throat tighten up suddenly, and the storm of emotion inside him felt all at once to have distilled into something more poignant.

“We... How did we miss it, Aria...?” he asked after a moment, his voice coming a little hoarse. “I *know* Viv has to deal with her own stuff sometimes, but how did we miss it? She was so *tired*... All the *time*...”

“Because we trusted her,” Aria answered quietly, and it was her turn to squeeze his fingers comfortingly. “Because we trusted her, Rei. She told you she would talk if there was something she needed to talk about, right? We trusted her to do that. She just... She...”

Words seemed to fail her, though.

“She didn’t,” Rei finished for her with a nod, feeling the tightness move up and become a strange pain in his cheeks. “She just... didn’t.” There was a weird itching in his eyes, now, and he blinked a few times to try to get rid them of the feeling. “But why *not*...?”

“Cause she can be as stubborn as you, and twice as much of a pain in the ass, apparently.”

Rei finally did laugh at that. A real, *actual* laugh. It was strange, though. It didn’t *sound* like a laugh, to his ears. It sounded... wet? Why did his laugh sound wet?

And then Rei realized that he was crying.

“Ah, damn” he muttered, making to let go of Aria’s hand so he could turn away and bury his face into an elbow as the tears started to pour unbidden.

She didn’t let him.

Instead, even as he tried to hide from her, Aria pulled him to her. She was there, then, drawing him into her before wrapping him in her arms and squeezing him tight. It didn’t matter that she was still a good 3 inches taller than him. It didn’t matter that her cheek rested against the side of his head, itself wet and sticky. It didn’t matter that his body was suddenly shaking in a way that had nothing to do with the cold they’d left outside.

All that mattered was that she was there, with Rei, to cry right alongside him.

He let it all out, then. All the fear and anger, the sadness and the shock. He didn’t scream or cry or sob, but his breaths came ragged and his hands gripped at the back of her uniform like he’d fall away into nothingness if he let go. He’d bent his face down into her neck, and it was there that he let the tears loose, let them all out in a wash of grief unlike anything he’d known before. He hated this, *hated* it. Not crying in front of Aria. He was surprised at how little he found he cared about that, in fact. No. What he hated was this feeling, this distressing, heavy sense of uselessness, of fear and worry. He hated the feeling, but he hated just as much that he *felt* it at all. It wasn’t like Viv was gone. She wasn’t here, sure, but she wasn’t *gone*. Not yet. Probably not ever.

And yet Rei couldn’t help but think there was only one other time in his life—all too recently—that he had ever felt so *scared*.

For a long time they stood like that, holding each other as they cried together. Rei didn’t have any idea how long it was before both of them started breathing normally again, but even after the tears ran out they stayed there for a while longer, taking comfort in each other’s presence.

It was the only feeling Rei could call pleasant he’d experienced in the last... what? Twelve hours or so?

He was just about to break away from Aria, just starting to debate whether he needed to thank her or needed apologize for leaving the shoulder of her uniform damp, when his NOED

lit up, briefly. It had already done so repeatedly in the last half hour or so, and each time Rei had brushed the notifications aside without a second thought, too far gone to care about whatever or whoever was trying to reach him. He was just about to do the same, but this time he caught a name in the thumbnail of the message, and his stomach gave an unpleasant flip as he pulled away from Aria faster than he'd meant to.

“Oh no,” he half-choked. “Aria, we forgot! We forgot to tell the others! We have to—!”

“It's okay.” Aria shook her head, letting her arms drop from around him but taking one of his hands up again comfortingly as her other lifted to wipe at her eyes. “I didn't. I updated Catcher on the way back. Told him as much as I could. Sorry... I was going to tell you, but you were... preoccupied. He'll have told Chancery by now, too, I bet.”

That explains the rush of pings, Rei thought, but even as he did he shook his head.

“Catcher. Good. That's great. But that doesn't *matter*.”

Aria blinked at that, then frowned. As she opened her mouth to say something, though, Rei corrected at light speed.

“I mean it *does* matter, obviously, yes! Sorry. I just... I meant...” Rei stopped himself, taking a breath. His mind was all over the place, sent tumbling by the night's events. He had to pull himself together, at least for a little while longer.

As it turned out, there was still one more challenge they needed face that night.

“Logan,” he said quietly, already stepping back, pulling Aria along with him, in the direction of the elevators. “Catcher and Chancery... They told *Logan*.”

The living area of suite 304 was a dismal sight as Rei and Aria ran in, leaving the door to the hall to bang shut behind them. Someone had turned on all the lights and even made the smart-glass of the outside wall transparent, revealing the sight of Galens' north wall and the blooming neon colors of Castalon in the distance. The space was bright, even welcoming now, and one could almost forget it was well past midnight of the most unpleasant evening anyone present had probably experienced since arriving at Galens.

Or maybe it would have been, had the three people hunched over on the matching pair of red couches angled at a V in the center of the room not all looked like they were waiting for news of their impending execution.

Catcher was the first on his feet as Rei and Aria entered, almost scrambling to stand even before the sound of the door faded. He'd put a shirt and sweats on, but there were bags under his yellow eyes that said he most certainly hadn't gone back to sleep. Chancery, who'd been seated next to him, looked like she hadn't bothered changing, but looked no less tired.

"Guys!" Catcher croaked, moving around the couch so fast to meet them he must have accidentally triggered his specs. "What's going on?? Aria said Viv's in the *hospital*!?"

Rei wanted to answer his friend. Desperately, even. He would have, too, would have told him everything he could the moment he walked in the door.

But it wasn't Catcher he was looking at as he moved closer to the couches. It wasn't even Chancery. They would hear what he and Aria had to say, and that would have to be good enough for now.

It wasn't *their* questions that need to be answered just then.

From the couch opposite the Saber and Lancer, the massive, black-haired boy who'd been sitting with them had been slower to get to his feet. At well-over six-and-half feet tall and with shoulders almost half that wide, Logan Grant—Firesong's Mauler, and largely considered the third-strongest first year at Galens after Rei and Aria—was as handsome as he was imposing, somehow managing to pull off both even in shorts and a loose grey tank top that might have made a decent bedsheet for the average teenager. Unlike Catcher and Chancery, Logan looked wide awake, his black eyes—the irises of which were ringed with a hint of bloody red—sharp and alert despite the late hour.

And yet, of the three of them, Logan's dark expression made him look like he expected to be the first to be walked to the gallows.

"Rei..." The Mauler's voice was a low, hoarse rumble. "Aria... What's going on...?"

Rei cursed internally, wanting to kick himself. He couldn't blame Catcher and Chancery for having woken Logan up. If he'd had the presence of mind to do so when they'd left, he probably would have done the same.

But that was before they knew—before he and Aria had seen Viv suspended in that anit-grav tank—and now Rei wasn't sure he had enough left in him to find the right words, that night.

Lucky for him, while he might be the *strongest* on the team, there was a reason *Aria* was Firesong's leader.

"Logan... Sit down," she said quietly, slipping passed Catcher and the coffee table—on which three full mugs of what looked like long-cold brew waited untouched—to take a seat herself at the end of his couch.

Logan hesitated, looking from her to Rei and back again. Then, probably seeing something in the grimness of their expressions—not the mention the irritated tinge that Rei knew wasn't just around his girlfriend's eyes, now—he eased himself back down slowly, taking a seat with a light creak of metal next to a small, fist-sized divot in the cushion Rei couldn't help but notice for the first time in a while, now. Viv had made that dent, he couldn't stop himself from remembering,

Just like he couldn't stop a hint of that previous pain from reaching his cheeks again at the thought...

"First off, Viv's alive, and Lieutenant Colonel Mayde says she has a really good chance of making a full recovery."

Aria's voice—despite the fact that she'd been crying right alongside Rei downstairs all of 3 minutes prior—was strong and gentle as she started to talk.

"She's in the city, at a special unit at Altmore Hospital. It's specialized for treating Users."

"Catcher said that," Logan nodded unsteadily. "But... *Why?* What *happened?*"

Aria did pause, this time, but only for as long as Rei suspected it took to steel herself to get the words out.

"Viv... pushed herself too far. In training. Tonight. She overtaxed her neuroline and sensory input in... in a big way."

"Meaning... what?" it was Chancery who asked, the question quiet as she, too, took a seat again. Behind the couch, Catcher started to let out a groan, but stopped himself. Like Rei,

the Saber was a rather extreme enthusiast of all things SCT-related, and—maybe predictably—even Aria’s brief description was apparently enough to clue him in to what was going on.

For the benefit of all, though, Aria explained anyway.

“Meaning that she fried her system, is currently unconscious with brain swelling, and in bad enough shape that the Galens facilities weren’t up to the task of treating her.”

And then, before anyone could ask anything else, she dove into the full explanation.

Rei was—not for the first time—in awe of his girlfriend by the end of the 10 minutes or so it took her to finish telling the others what they’d learned and figured out that night, about Viv’s extra training hours, how and why she’d been so tired, and why they thought she’d been pushing herself so hard without telling anyone. Not only did Aria get everything out quickly and concisely, but she managed to keep her composure the entire time, not so much as glancing once at Rei for support. She danced deftly, too, around the subject of Shido, Viv’s upgrade, and the User-Unique Ability. She even dodged any mention of the encounter with General Abel. Her uncle’s gag order held firm, after all, and a part of Rei couldn’t help but wonder if Aria didn’t believe he could keep *those* bits of the story to himself, even for the time being.

A much larger part of himself, on the other hand, the part who whispered with the warmth of the trust he had in her—developed right alongside a range of more complicated emotions for months now—was just grateful she wasn’t even giving him the *chance* to think about putting this part of the night on his shoulders, too.

“I’m sorry I didn’t explain more when we were on the way back,” Aria wrapped up, apologizing to Catcher in one of the few instances her attention had left Logan as she’d talked. “I... was having a hard time...”

“Can’t imagine why,” the Saber mumbled from where he’d long left Rei to stand on his own behind the couch, opting to sit back down where he’d promptly put his face in his hands. “Can’t *remotely* imagine why. Not even a little.”

Aria managed the smallest of smiles at that, but lost it immediately as she turned back to Logan.

The Mauler was pale. Paler than Rei had ever seen him, actually, and he'd been in fights with the guy where the Arena had been temporarily convincing Logan brain he'd lost an arm or a leg, or both. His black eyes seemed sunken and dark, and his gaze was on his calloused hands, open and loose in his lap before him, Honori's red vysetrium glimmering against the white steel of its bands around his wrist. He'd barely moved—much less said so much as a word—the entire time Aria had spoken.

If he couldn't see the boy's wide shoulders lift and fall with every breath, Rei might have confused him for a corpse.

"Logan... she's going to be alright," Aria told the Mauler quietly, going so far as to reach out and place a slim hand on his bare knee. "Mayd says he really thinks she's going to be alright..."

"And if she's not?"

It was the first question he'd posed since Aria sat down beside him. The boy hadn't even flinched when she touch him, and his eyes still seemed unable to leave his open palms.

Aria paused, like she was unsure of how to answer this. Then, at last, she looked around at Rei, expression pained.

Silently asking for help.

Rei gave her the tiniest of nods before taking over.

"That's not worth thinking about, man," he said quietly, stepping up to stand behind Catcher and Chancery, putting his hands on the back of their couch to lean over it. "The Lieutenant Colonel said the chances of anything but a full recovery are slim." This was a bit of a stretch, but Rei wasn't interested in prioritizing technicalities at the moment. "She just needs time."

"And we'll get to see her?" Chancery got out the question in a mumble from below him. She had her head bowed over clenched hands, and at some point she'd pulled her braids loose from the round bun they'd been in atop her head. Instead, her hair now hung like a silver-black curtain, hiding her face from all.

Still, Rei didn't miss the trembling of her fingers as one thumb rubbed hard along the back of the other, balled atop her knees.

“Yeah, we will.” Rei nodded, looking up to try and meet Logan’s eyes again as he did, even if it was in vain. “During our free time. I’m going Sunday, first thing. Just need to get a staff to escort us.”

“I’m coming too,” Catcher echoed this at once.

“Me too.” Chancery this time, and she finally let go of herself so that one hand could raise up into her veil of braids, seemingly to wipe at her eyes.

“We can all go,” Aria agreed with a nod, and while she’d pulled her hand from his knees, she’d never once done more than glance away from Logan. “I’ll find us a chaperone. I’ll hold Hippolyta to my uncle’s throat if I have to.”

“Let’s hope it doesn’t take *that*,” Catcher chuckled weakly. “Your new shield is cool and all, Aria, but I’m preeetty sure the Colonel could still plaster you to the wall with a sneeze...”

Almost everyone managed a small laugh at that. Even Chancery, though she still didn’t lift her face.

Everyone except Logan, who still hadn’t done more than blink at his hands.

The humor drained away quickly, and no one said anything else for a while, maybe all waiting—like Rei was—in the half-hearted hope the Mauler could shake himself from the dark place he’d clearly been dropped down into.

After nearly a minute of painful silence, though, Aria gave in and tried again.

“Logan, she’s going to be—” she started.

But then, before she could finish, the boy cut her off.

“I... should have known,” he said quietly, and his fingers finally twitched.

“Logan...” It was Rei’s turn to try to interject, but Catcher beat him to it.

“Don’t be stupid, man,” the Saber said with a sigh, leaning back to rest against the couch, crossing his arms over his chest as he did. “Why? Cause you spend a lot of time with her? Come on. We *all* could have—”

“No.”

The word rang in a growl, and the fingers that had only flinched before suddenly curled into two, brick-sized fists in Logan’s lap.

“You don’t get it,” the boy continued. “I *knew* she was having a hard time. I *knew* she was worried about being left behind. She *told me* as much, at the tournament.”

Rei exchanged a glance with Aria at this.

“Logan...” Aria tried again. “Rei and I both did, too. Well... maybe we didn’t *know*, exactly, but we were pretty sure that Viv was—”

“But I *did*,” Logan snarled, and for the first time in a while Rei heard an old fire in the Mauler’s voice. An old, ugly fire.

“I did...” Logan repeated only a little less forcefully, and in his laps his knuckles were white along his fists. “I just... I thought she had a handle on it. I told her it was stupid, and I thought she figured that out too. This whole week, she’s been telling me she’s just been staying up late catching up on the schoolwork we missed over Sectionals.” His jaw tightened, his words coming through clenched teeth now. “I’m such an *idiot*.”

“No, you aren’t.” Aria’s voice will still gently, but unforgiving now. “Logan, I already did this dance with Rei tonight, and I’m *not* doing it with you. It’s no one’s fault. Viv could have talked to any of us. We could have seen what was going on. The *staff* could have seen what was going on. We *all* messed up, and none of us did. It’s not your—”

“SHUT UP!”

CRASH.

Logan was on his feet, standing so abruptly he hit the coffee table with a hand on the way up, jolting it with enough force to send the still-full—but thankfully long-cooled—mugs tumbling across its surface. One fell right off the side and shattered on the floor, resulting in Chancery yanking her knees up to her chest with a yelp and Catcher leaping up and out of the way of the spill as he cursed.

“Shut up, Laurent!” Logan snarled, but he wasn’t looking at Aria. He wasn’t looking at anyone, in fact. His eyes were wide but unfocused, like the wall across from him was some window to a distant place only he could see. Rei could have been wrong, be he thought he saw a glimmer of red flash across them, too, a brief, violent glow of crimson that might have been more than then the odd catch of the light above their heads. “You don’t get it! None of you get it! I didn’t *see it!* I didn’t! How could I not see it?!”

No one answered, all of them too surprised by the outburst. Aria hadn't even gotten to her feet, one hand halfway to her open mouth as she stared at Logan.

Their silence seemed only to fuel the Mauler.

"Viv..." he started unsteadily, his voice a thunderous growl. "Viv is the only one... The *only* one who ever..." His breaths came rapidly, short, furious burst of air in and out, in and out. "She was the *only* one who ever... And when it was *my turn*, I didn't. I *didn't*... Even though she *told me*..."

"To steal a quote from Aria..." Rei interjected quietly. "Viv has to carry her own baggage sometimes, man. She told me she'd talk to me if she ever need to. I bet she said the same to you. This isn't on us..."

"Oh, so it *is* her fault?" Logan's eyes finally found their focus, and they snapped on Rei as the Mauler's handsome face twisted into a snarl.

"Did I say that?" Rei shot back through clenched teeth, feeling an old anger of his own start to rise at the sight of that expression. "No. I'm just saying it's *not on us*." He forced himself to be stay calm, forced his voice to stay even. "But even if you're going to insist on taking the blame... you *don't get to take it out on your teammates*."

Logan glowered. "I'm not—!"

"Dude, look around!" Rei cut him off sharply. "Look around, and tell me that's not *exactly* what you're doing! Wake up!"

Those words, at last, seemed to reach the boy, because Logan blinked. Then he did, in fact, look around. First at Chancery, who was staring at him with wide eyes, then Catcher, who glared back with old ease. Then he seemed to notice the coffee mugs, two of them tipped over to spill their contents over the surface of the now-askew table, the last in a dozen sharp pieces atop a damp patch in the carpet at the Saber's feet.

Logan's face had already started to fall, dropping into a sort of horrified realization, when his gaze fell on Aria, who still had that hand halfway to her mouth in what seemed like some varying mix of shock and concern.

That was when something seemed to dawn on the massive boy, and his horror twisted further, changing into something else entirely.

Fear, Rei thought.

“I...” Logan started, his face suddenly grey again. “I—I’m sor—I didn’t mean to...”

“To what, *Grant*.” Catcher’s choice of words was as deliberate as his tone was unforgiving. “To throw and tantrum while jumping down all our throats?”

Logan’s cheeks only paled further, and Rei saw something then, too. Despite the rigidness of his shoulders, despite the fists still clenched at his side... Logan Grant looked suddenly as small and weak as Rei thought he’d ever felt in his life.

“I—I’m sorry...” the Mauler managed to get out, his horrified gaze dropping to the shattered mug again as he started step unsteadily out from around the table. “I’m so sorry. I—I have to make a call... I have to—I’m sorry.”

“Hold on, where are you—?” Catcher started to shout.

But Logan was already gone, bolting from the room suite so fast the door to the hall banged open yet again.

“He ‘has to make a call’??” the Saber repeated as though in disbelief. “What? Who the hell is he going to call at two in the morning??”

No one answered, though. For a time no one said anything, in fact, all of them looking anywhere but at each other. Then, at last, Chancery moved, sliding gingerly down from the couch to crouch by the coffee table to start picking up the broken fragments of the mug.

Without a word, the rest of them all moved to help her, each of them keen to have something—*anything* really—to do, to distract them from the well of pure misery that had been that evening.

They’d just finished picking up the pieces when there came a click from behind the couch Aria had been sitting on, and all of them looked up to see Jack Benaly peering at them blearily from his open door.

“Guys... seriously...” he almost begged. “If you’re trying to sabotage Red Crown catching up to you, this will definitely work. If you’re not... can you *please* keep it down? Please?”

Rei slept fitfully for what remained of that night. He was exhausted, but the stress of everything kept him awake for at least an hour after walking Aria back to her room on the second floor. What was more, he discovered—in the darkness of his room after turning off the light—that he was as *angry* as he was anything else. At Viv, for being an idiot. At Central and General Abel, for being manipulative *bastards*. At himself, too, because as much as he told Aria that he didn't blame himself... the truth was that Rei understood how Logan felt better than he wanted to admit.

Maybe that was why, when he woke up late that morning—having mercifully slept through the early morning training period Aria had told them all the night before she was canceling—the first thing Rei had in mind was finding the Mauler and forcing him to bury the hatchet.

Or maybe punch his face in. He wasn't completely sure the two were mutually exclusive concepts.

But Logan didn't meet up with the four of them to head to breakfast that morning, as had become Firesong's fashion. Nor did he show up late for it. In fact, it was in somewhat-dismal silence that they ate—feeling all too out of place with two of the squad absent from the table—and with only a somber “See you guys later” that Rei and Aria, who were both in the 1-A classblock, parted ways with Catcher and Chancery outside the mess hall to head for their morning lectures. The walk, too, felt cold and lonely with just the two of them, even given the decently warm day and a pleasant winter sun. Viv and Logan were both part of 1-A with them, and—like with breakfast—it had become a habit since they'd returned from Sectionals the previous weekend for all four of them to head out together for the lessons and lectures that always took up their first half of every school day. Viv *had* been quieter than usual of late—and now they all knew why—but even then she'd always been the most boisterous one, either chatting with Logan as they walked or else teasing Rei and Aria for doing things like “standing too close” or “being too obvious”. The Mauler, on the other hand, was almost always the quietest of them, but his absence was still felt as they walked with barely an exchanged words along the stone path towards the Device Evolution building.

Rei started to get worried when Logan didn't show up for that first class—a talk by John Markus, the head of the department, on the varied impact deliberate training can have on guiding a CAD's development—and the concerned glances Aria kept shooting the boy's empty seat told him he wasn't the only one. More alarmingly, Logan didn't make the following double-period in Combat Theory either, and Rei and Aria weren't the only ones to notice the lack of attendance. Their instructors didn't say a word about it—which Rei found odd, even if *Viv's* reason for absence had already been disseminated by Mayd and the Colonel—but the same couldn't be said for their classmates. Bahnt Senson—a bald, good-natured Brawler who trained in the same Type-group as Rei and preferred to go by “Sense”—caught up to the pair of them after their Device Evolution lecture to ask if “Viv and Grant got each other sick or something?”. Kay Sandree—Sense's suitemante and one of the school's top Lancers—had been looking concerned right alongside him while the Saber Leron Joy—another suitemate of theirs who Rei could tolerate on the good days—glowered disapprovingly from behind the pair. Adam Jax had asked much the same as they'd sat down for Combat Theory, and even Leda Truant—a Phalanx known to be the class gossip, and one of Rei's *least* favorite fellow first-years—had braved trying to ask Aria where Viv and Logan were before class started. She'd scurried off with a squeaked “Sorry! Nevermind!” when Aria had only answered her with a glare so poignant it should have set fire to her hair.

Which served the girl's gall right, in Rei's opinion.

After Combat Theory, the two of them *had* hoped they might at least see Logan at lunch, but were again disappointed when only Catcher and Chancery turned up at their regular table in the south end of the mess, along the edge of the glass dome that made up the building's outer wall among the sheltering evergreens of the southern quarter of the arboretum-like hall. Again the four of them ate with only some subdued small talk, with even Catcher—almost *always* the one to try and lighten the mood with a few laughs here and there—seemingly unable to muster up more than a dim spark of his usual cheer.

In the end, it was with only another muted “Later...” that Rei and Aria set off alone once more for the mess, heading this time for the center of campus.

Then again, as they approached the middle of the grounds, Rei had to admit that he couldn't help but feel at least a *little* better while they walked. He and Aria didn't say much more than they had on the way to class that morning, it was true, but they were headed to combat training now, and Rei had been thinking since falling asleep angry the night before that if *anything* was going to make him feel better that day, it would be hitting something. True, given it was his last day of restrictions according to Ameena Ashton—the young, likeable doctor in charge of his case at Galens—he wouldn't be swinging at anything more than projection partners, but it was still something, and a *hell* of a lot better than stewing in his own feelings with his ass stuck to a classroom chair, which had made for a morning of absolute hell. What was more, as they neared the middle of the grounds Rei allowed himself to be taken away by a more immediate distraction, and one he had privately sworn a hundred times before he would never allow himself to get used to.

The Arena was the dark gem of the Galens Institute, a looming black diamond nestled firmly in its midst. Boasting a seating capability of over 150,000 spectators, the building was visible from almost anywhere on campus, but exponentially more imposing as one approached it. Oblong with its length running perfectly north to south, the outside of the stadium comprised of a thousand flat, harshly-cut metal sheets that reflected black in the winter sun. While it was closed now to the cold, during the warmer months the ceiling of the Arena was kept open to the sky, a large circle in the top lifting upwards and away in a number of massive, triangular wedges to form a sort of jagged crown high, high above the ground. Even without that distinctive feature, though, the place was impressive, and as Rei, Aria, and the scattering of other students from 1-A arriving from lunch started to climb the dark steps leading up into the building, he couldn't help but feel—not for the first time—like he was willfully walking into the belly of some great dragon.

The main level of the Arena was as it always was, the 150-by-70-yard expanse of the combat floor all standard projection plating, the black steel interrupted only by silver lines that marked the edges of the Wargames field taking up the entirety of the space, as well as the two smaller Team Battle and Dueling fields held within it. The railed walkway that formed the bottom of the expansive, rising stands was some ten feet above the floor, and it was along this

path that Rei and Aria joined the others to head towards the nearest of a score or so of smaller entrances scattered throughout the seating, each of which led down into the stark white tunnels that made up Arena underworks. There, Rei again made an effort to let himself be distracted by the flashing recordings of the forms and figures projected onto the smart-glass panes layered over the plasteel of the walls. They featured—as they always had—the legends of the Galens Institute, the Users of the past who’d climbed to the very top of the professional SCTs and risen victorious. There were a multitude of Global winners amongst the recorded, and even a good number of Systems-level champions. The Duelist James Wicky and the Lancer Clementine ‘Edgewarden’ Ward had each topped the Astra System SCTs in the distant past, while ‘The Ivory Shield’, the Phalanx Serana von Bor, had won her home tournament in the Sol System some decades prior. Every dozen yards, too, the telltale flashes of orange, red, and white marked yet *another* display featuring the King-Class Brawler Dalek O’Rourke, the Gatesmasher—or was it Gatecracker?—the only Galens graduate as of yet to have taken on the Intersystems. the absolute *peak* of the SCTs, and won. Rei watched in awe as he passed one of O’Rourke’s displays he’d never noticed before, upon which was a looping image of the legendary Brawler uppercutting his armor-clad opponent so hard with one piston-like fist that the poor Saber was blasted 50-something feet into the air as a shockwave rippled out from the point of impact.

From his side there came a muffled snicker. Rei blinked and realized he’d craned his neck about with his mouth hanging open to watch the loop for a fifth time as he’d passed. Closing his jaw with a *click*, he turned to find Aria staring firmly at the opposite wall, one hand dropping from her face like she’d just been covering her mouth.

“What?” Rei muttered, a little embarrassed to have been caught staring. “He’s cool...”

Aria, still not looking around at him, only gave a little nod, almost as though to say “Uh huh.”

The moment of levity, unfortunately, didn’t last. As the two of them piled into an elevator alongside several of their 1-A classmates to head down to SB2—the Arena sub-basement the first-years always trained in—more than one person watched them curiously, or else shot them sidelong glances before trading puzzled looks with whatever friend or another was standing

nearby. Rei supposed it spoke highly of the bond Firesong had formed—or was in the process of forming, in certain cases—that so many people found it odd he and Aria were arriving to class alone, but it didn't make him feel better about the situation.

On the other hand, what awaited them in their claimed aisle at the back of the locker room, where all the first years always changed out of their uniforms into the red-on-grey of their skiing-tight combat suits, did a better job of that.

“Logan!”

It was Aria who made the quiet exclamation, having turned the corner of the row first. Taking it right after her, Rei's gut tightened a little as he, too, saw the Mauler. Then it relaxed, though it took him a second to figure out why.

Logan was alone in the aisle, and seemed to have been waiting for them. He was seated on the long bench that split the aisle between the two lines of anti-grav lockers on either side of the way, and had his jacket in one hand, though the rest of his regulars were still on. He looked to have been staring at nothing again, but started when Aria called his name, turning and standing up at once, his face tense and...

Guilty, Rei realized as he followed behind Aria a little more slowly, his girlfriend having hurried ahead.

He suspected he knew what was coming.

“Logan where have you *been?*?” Aria demanded even before she'd even reached the Mauler. “You missed class! Both of them! Are you okay??”

The question, apparently, wasn't remotely what Logan Grant had been expecting, because for a second he looked only stricken.

Then he relaxed.

“I know,” he grunted as Rei caught up to stand behind Aria, watching him warily. Logan seemed to be having trouble meeting their eyes. “I... I was given the morning off. I think I needed it...”

Given, Rei thought curiously. Guess that explains why the professors didn't say anything...

“But you're okay??” Aria demanded again, sounding concerned. “You're alright. After last night...”

She didn't finish the statement, but the guilt returned to Grant's face again.

"Aria..." he started uncertainly, his jacket hanging limp at his side. "Listen... I'm really... I'm *really* sorry. Last night, I..."

But he seemed unable to finish, his mouth opening, but no words coming out.

Aria gave him a little, but when several more attempts to speak failed, she decided to step in.

"Logan, it's okay," she told him kindly, waving a hand before her like it was all water under the bridge. "It's *okay*. We were all on edge, so I get why you—"

Taking them both by surprise, Logan cut her off.

"No." His words were grateful, but firm. "No. Please. I need to get this out."

Aria stopped talking at once, and Rei studied the boy as he continued to struggle for a while more. It was lucky the rest of 1-A tended not to change in the same aisle as the Firesong members, or they would have stumbled onto a rather awkward scene while the three of them stood there in silence.

Finally Logan took in a breath—a single long breath—seemed to hold it in, then finally let it go.

"I'm sorry," he got out at last, more assuredly, and while meeting Aria's eye even this time. "I shouldn't have snapped at you, and I definitely shouldn't have told you to... to shut up." He stumbled a little at this admission, but kept going. "I... I didn't mean it, and I'm *really* sorry."

Aria waiting a beat to see if he had more to say, then nodded in understanding. Logan relaxed a little, but clearly wasn't done as his eyes lifted to Rei.

"You too, Rei," he said. "I'm sorry. And you were right. What... what's happening with Viv... It's not my fault."

"Uh huh," Rei managed, folding his arms over his chest and chewing on his words for a second, debating. He'd woken up wanting to smooth things over, yeah, but now that he was face to face with the Mauler... Well, he'd never been as gentle a soul as Aria was, had he?

Still...

Rei sighed.

“Viv’s got us all scared shitless, man,” he grumbled placatingly, dropping his bag on the bench before turning to the closest locker and tugging it open. “And I appreciate the apology. We’re good. For now.”

From the corner of his eye, he saw Logan relax in truth, then, and he couldn’t stop himself from continuing.

“Chancery will probably be cool with things too, but Catcher’s a different matter, just so you know.”

Surprisingly, this only elicited a nod from the Mauler, who’d started to sit back down on the bench.

“Yeah... I hear that. He’s got good reason. I’m... I’m still working on things. And last night was... bad.”

“For all of us, yeah,” Aria agreed with grunt of a laugh from between them, in the process of kicking off her boots. Putting them away, she exchanged a sidelong look with Rei before continuing. “You seem to be doing better now, though...?”

Again Logan nodded, but didn’t answer this subtle probe. After a couple seconds Rei was pretty sure the boy wouldn’t be saying anything more, and he was just about to try to change the subject to anything that would have them thinking of something else when Logan spoke.

“I’ve... I’ve been seeing someone.”

Rei froze. Something like lightning rolled through his body, jolting up from the boots he was in the process of untying to the very top of his head. Around them, the sounds and chatter from the rest of 1-A changing in the other aisle seemed suddenly to fade away. At his left, Aria too had tensed, and slowly she closed the door to the locker she’d just opened.

“Oh?” she asked, cool and cold.

Logan didn’t seem to hear the ice in her tone as he nodded and continued.

“Yeah... I’ve... I’ve been wanting to tell you guys. For a while now. I just... I wasn’t really sure how, you know?”

“That so?” Rei growled as he turned haltingly to face the boy, fury burning in his chest.

If this bastard is going to sit here and admit to—

“Viv wanted me to tell you months ago. I just... It didn’t feel like the right time, you know? I didn’t really feel like I’d... done the work yet, I guess?”

All at once the fire winked out, and the fury that Rei was pretty sure had been etched all over his face was abruptly replaced by what he could only assume was total confusion. For her part, though, while Aria’s expression cleared as well, it was only a second before something like realization dawned in its place.

“Logan... when you say you’ve ‘been seeing someone’... What do you mean?”

Logan, who’d just finished unbuttoning his shirt, looked up at them with a frown as he pulled it off one arm at a time.

“What do you mean ‘what do I mean’? A therapist. Well, a psychiatrist, actually. Galens has a couple on staff at the hospital.”

There was a moment of silence at that, both Rei and Aria gaping at Logan, jaws on the floor.

And then, at the same time, they started to laugh.

“*Dude*,” Rei barely got out, covering his face and leaning a shoulder against the edge of his locker as Aria half-dropped, half-collapsed onto the bench. “Don’t *do* that!”

“Do what??” Logan asked, very clearly totally bewildered now, looking from one to the other in total confusion. “What did I do??”

“Just... phrasing, Logan,” Aria choked out, shaking her head into where her face was pressed into both hands, elbows on her knees. “*Phrasing*, next time, okay? I’m pretty sure you were about a *nanosecond* from getting the crap kicked out of you by Rei, and *I* definitely wasn’t about to stop it.”

“*What???*” Logan apparently still totally lost, looked to Rei in confusion. “What are you talking ab—?”

And then it was his turn to realize, and after second’s stunned silence his face flushed red.

“THAT’S NOT WHAT I MEANT!” he almost shrieked, sending Rei and Aria into renewed fits.

It felt good to laugh, to *actually* laugh. So good. It hurt, in its own way, and maybe Rei would feel bad about it later when he thought about Viv alone and suspended in that anti-grav tank at Altmore. For the time being, though, it felt *really* good to laugh, and he couldn't help but feel like maybe the day was looking up just the sliiiiightest bit as he pulled off his jacket, still chuckling to himself.

They finished changing quickly after that, Rei and Aria grinning the whole time as only two people who'd rediscovered what it was like to smile could manage. Logan's pleading of his case—assuring them again and again that he'd most certainly NOT meant it *that* way—got quieter and quieter until they turned to nothing more than grumbles, and so it was in the lightest mood he'd felt since the afternoon before that Rei led the way from the locker room and back out into the massive, arching hall that made up the outer loop of the subbasement. Halfway down the way, the left wall of the corridor vanished, and turning the corner Rei stepped onto the sub-basement combat field with a sense of eagerness he didn't think he could have managed even 10 minutes before.

He'd barely taken two steps across the black plating, Aria and Logan right on his heels, when a voice called out just to their left.

“Ward! Grant! On me, Cadets!”

The training area was a single cavernous chamber, its white walls rising some 30 or 40 yards before curving in to form the flattop ceiling, providing enough overhead clearance for proper field verticality and leveled combat. Like the main floor above them, its floor consisted of a full 150-by-70-yard Wargames field, but instead of the standard subdivisions within it, the projection plating had been split into 30-yard Dueling fields in three rows of two fields each, one ring for each of the standard Types groups.

Waiting at-ease just outside the edge of the closest of these, his trunk-like arms clasped behind his back to allow a full display of the red griffin on the chest of his white combat suit, Second Lieutenant Michael Bretz was watching their group expectantly.

If that wasn't enough, Captain Dent, in her standard black and golds, stood right by his side.

“You, too, Laurent,” the man added as they all caught sight of the pair. “Come on. You might as well hear this too.”

Rei exchanged a curious look with the other two over his shoulder, then jogged over towards Bretz and the captain as summoned. The second lieutenant was the Brawler-Type sub-instructor, and a rare A9 User, which not only tied him as the highest-ranked among their teachers alongside the Phalanx Catori Imala, but technically classified him among the strongest fighters on the Galens campus, lagging beyond only Colonel Dent and the Iron Bishop herself. He’d also been rather more fond of Rei than most of their other instructors since the very start of the year, but it was still odd for the man—or any of the other combat training staff—to call them out before class started.

“Sir...?” Rei asked tentatively as all three of them came to a sharp salute in front of the imposing pair.

“I’ll leave it to you, Bretz?” Dent asked, not looking away from Rei and the others.

“Yes, ma’am,” the second lieutenant answered curtly. The Bishop nodded, taking in the three of them for a second more, brown eyes intent and searching.

Then, with flash of gold on black, she stepped briskly away, headed towards where the majority of the class was gather around the other sub-instructors, all of whom stood in their usual spot atop a slight-raised Field 3.

“At ease, Cadets,” Bretz told them as soon as Dent was gone, his voice low and steady, eyes trailing over Rei’s face, then Aria’s and Logan’s. “I just wanted a word. According to the captain, you three had a... rough night. That so?”

Rei swallowed, and behind him he thought he felt the others tense slightly.

Bretz must have noticed, because he let out a sigh and took a more casual stance, unclasp his hands to bring one up flat before him. “Not looking to talk about it if you don’t want to. Actually, kinda the opposite.” He looked to Rei. “Ward. Dent pulled some strings for you. We’re lifting your combat restrictions a little early. You’re back in with the regular group as of today.”

Something hot rose up inside of Rei, at these words. It wasn’t excitement, per se, or more eagerness, or any such positive feeling. If anything, it was more like something that had been

held down inside of him, held down and struggling to get loose for a week now, had abruptly broken free of its chains and was scrabbling up his gut and chest towards freedom.

“Are you serious, sir?” He’d meant to whisper, but the question came out more like a quiet hiss.

“One hundred percent, Cadet,” Ward answered with a nod. “We talked to Dr. Ashton. It took a little pressure, but she eventually gave in. Said your recovery has been even better than expected, or something like that. So she’s okay with letting us toss you back into hell a day early.” [*revisit. Isn’t he only pretending to be on light duty to hide right now?*]

The heat was only growing, a sharp, burning anticipation. Rei recognized it, then. Realized what it was.

Anticipation. Anticipation for a release he hadn’t even thought to hope for. His restrictions had been lifted. He was going to be allowed to fight, *really* fight. The thought brought him something akin to joy, and yet lacking any of the pleasant edge of it. That was fine, though. He wasn’t looking for joy. He’d found that—even if just a moment of it—by accident in the locker room with Aria and Logan.

And hadn’t he been thinking earlier about how punching something would make him feel better...?

He was going to be allowed to *fight*.

And then, abruptly, his excitement tempered itself.

And he wasn’t the only one.

“But... sir...” Aria started uncertainty from behind him,. “What about Shido? What about... you know... all *that*?”

The heat in Rei’s chest turned cool, hearing her voice the very concerns that had just flashed across his thoughts. Yes, what about Shido? Aria’s reveal of Hippolyta’s C8 evolution—complete with the start of the facial armor that usually only manifested in the late B-ranks—had caused waves among the Galens students earlier that week. Though he hadn’t been in class when she’d made her first call since returning from Sectionals—recovering as he’d been at the time—Rei had seen the lasting effects since, manifesting in the form of lingering eyes on Aria when she passed, and even a few poignant questions from people he

was pretty sure she'd ever spoken to. It wasn't just the first years, either. The second- and third-years had had occasion to stare during meals and the few other times the classes had opportunity to mix, and while some of the gazes were curious, others... not so much...

Anatoli Sidorov's eyes, for example, had never look colder...

It wasn't *just* Aria, though. Rei had left for Sectional's a C7 User, tied as the strongest rank among the first-year cadets, and come back a C9. A two-rank jump in a week, which was by now well-known to have happened almost all at once, in the disastrous final Dual of the tournament that had nearly killed him. Between that and the attention Aria was already getting for her Device's changes, what would the reaction be when the class caught sight, at long last, of *Shido*...?

Then again...

Bretz grinned at Aria. It was a grim sort of smile, but it made Rei's heart leap all the same.

"We can't hide him forever, Laurent." His voice was lower now, as he looked back to Rei, clearly intent on keeping the words from the line of still-chatting classmates that were trickling in from the hall 10 feet behind them. "You're to keep Temporal Step under wraps, at least for now. Captains orders. Understood?"

Rei blinked. "Uh yes, sir. But... that's it?"

"That's it, Cadet," Bretz offered him a pleased little nod, his voice raising to it's normal pitch again. "We're doing cross training today. You'll be in Imala's group, so take advantage of it. If you know what I mean."

Rei's eyes went wide, but he, too, nodded, indeed understanding perfectly. Imala, as the Phalanx sub-instructor, was the perfect teacher to help him with his newest Type Shift mode. In fact, she'd recently joined Bretz and Claire de Soto—the Saber sub-instructor, and a former SCT professional fighter—during Firesong's extra training hours in the evenings for exactly that purpose.

Rei was being told it was time to bare—at least *almost*—all.

Yeah... Maybe Temporal Step was one secret best left under lock and key juuuuust a little longer...

"I didn't just call you over, though did?"

Rei blinked, coming back to himself as Bretz looked passed him, over his shoulder to Logan.

“Grant, the captain got a call this morning. My understanding is you were given leave to take the morning off. How you feeling?”

“Uh... Fine, sir,” Logan answered, sounding a little surprised.

Bretz raised an eyebrow at him, and Rei swore he felt the Mauler *fidget* at his back.

“... Better, sir,” Logan amended after a second. “A bit, at least...”

“Glad to hear it.” Bretz nodded again, but was watching Logan more carefully, now. “Dent mentioned she was apparently given some suggestions for... I think the term was ‘healthy outlets’. Some ways that she and the sub-instructors might be able to ‘help things along’.” His eyes narrowed. “I’m not much for punching pillows and the like, but there were some good thoughts, too.” He dipped his head in the direction of Field 5, where the Phalanxes usually trained. “Cross-training today is going to be pair-offs. No rotations. Your jobs will be to learn everything you can about your matches, and to figure out how to beat them—or *keep* beating them—at any cost.”

“Um... Yes, sir...?” Logan said, sounding about as lost as Rei was. “Is there... a reason you’re telling us that, sir...?”

“Sure is!” Bretz barked, a fresh fire suddenly alight in his eyes, which had settled once more on Rei. “The captain had the thought that while Ward here has to pop out of his shell eventually, it was probably best to make sure we matched him with someone who isn’t going to be mouthing at the air like a fish out of water when he pulls out that new shiny shield of his.” The grin returned. “You two catch my meaning?”

The heat was burning in Rei’s chest like an actual flame by then, and it *was* excitement now.

He wasn’t just going to be allowed to fight! Rei *was* the strongest first year at Galens now, it was true. Probably among the strongest first years in the ISC, thanks to Shido.

But if he was going to be sticking to Phalanx mode all afternoon...

“Sorry, Cadets. Couldn’t get a pillows.” Bretz’s grin was *pure* anticipation, now. “But we figured you two using *each other* as punching bags might make for a good ‘healthy outlet’, wouldn’t you say?”

CHAPTER 8

SHING!

The heavy edge of Honoris' long blade, outlined in red, sang as it ripped through the air, nearly taking off Rei's head for the third time in all of ten seconds. Ducking the axe, he fought the temptation to backpedal, fought the instinct to give ground in favor of looking for a better opening. It was what a Brawler would have done. Maybe even a Saber, if they were fast enough.

But Rei wasn't either of those in the moment, was he?

Turning the momentum of the missed swing to his advantage, Logan pivoted on his back leg with a twisting dexterity Rei had always found unfair for a Mauler. His free foot shot out in a ripping side kick that carried all the force of a cannon. Ordinarily, Rei would have done everything he could to *not* get hit by that kick. He would have dodged, would have ducked or weaved or worked to reposition himself in some form or fashion either to try to take advantage of any opening the move offered, or at the very least get to a place where he could gather himself for the next clash.

But that just wasn't how Phalanxes worked.

CLANG!

Shido's great tower shield, a solid wall of rounded black and white steel detailed in glowing blue, rang like a bell as he accepted the hit full on, absorbing the blow through his elbow, shoulder, hips, and knees, just like he'd been practicing all week. His feet, on the other hand, didn't so much as budge. Rei was as firm as a rooted tree..

At least right up until the moment Logan planted his kicking foot a fraction of a second later and put his *shoulder* into the shield, this time.

"Wo-woob!" Rei couldn't help but exclaim as he was forced suddenly backwards, tripped over his own feet. He'd accepted the kick *perfectly*, taken it head on just like Aria and Imala had shown him. Where'd he'd failed, though, was in resetting to ready for the *second* hit, and as a result he toppled like a falling tower.

CRASH!

Shido's heavy plating brought him to the white floor of the Neutral Zone hard. His reactive shielding, mercifully, accepted the relatively-minor impact, which was good given the back of his head hit about as hard as anywhere else. It let Rei keep a clear mind, his reduce Cognition still whirling in his head as it worked to keep up with the disadvantages of the fights.

Luckily, it also made sure he noticed the red outlines of the Honoris slashing down on him again even before his body had come to rest against the floor.

With a grunt Rei wrenched his shield up, getting it in front of his prone body just in time to catch the axe against the steel. The blade struck with so much direct force, though, that its upper tip punched 4 inches straight through the thick, just above where it was latched to the armor of his left arm. At the same time, it slammed the shield against his body. If he'd been in any of Shido's other modes, Rei was pretty sure the result would have been almost half-a-foot of white steel and red vysetrium punching into his chest, and probably resulting in a rapid FDA.

Instead, the blow—most of whose impact had been robbed by the blocking shield—struck the thick, rope-wire armor over Rei's heart and bounced off it inconsequentially.

There was a curse from above, and Rei felt a sudden pulling back up against his shield. Logan was trying to reclaim his weapon, he realized, which was stuck firmly in the shield. His Cognition finally clicked into place, then, and with only a quick glance down Rei kicked out, feeling his heel connect with an armored shin. The blow, awkward as it was, was hardly enough to drop the big Maulter, but it *did* force him to one knee, if even for a second.

For any student at Galens, though, a second was more than enough time.

Rei wrenched at his shield arm, dislodging the axe to let him roll clear of their exchange. Slower than usually he might be, but his speed was still in the high Ds in Phalanx Mode, so he was back on his feet in a blink, damaged shield raised defensively before him, the thick sword that complimented it swept back at the ready, prepped to strike at whatever opportunity it was given.

He was good and set, therefore, when Logan launched at him straight from where he kneeled on the ground, black-red eyes blazing as the boy swung Honoris in a blistering sweep at his side.

For another minute or two the pair of them fought like that, battling it out with tremendous crash after tremendous crash. Logan was a powerhouse of destruction, a force of nature hacking and slashing and slamming his way towards victory with the same ferocity some great storm might churn away at a cliff until there was nothing left. Rei, on the otherhand, was an iron bulwark, a lone bastion against the boiling, smashing sea, unwilling to yield even when Logan came at him again and again and again.

But, as is often the truth of such a battle, it was nature that won.

The feint didn't come out of nowhere. It was a move Rei had seen Logan pull off before, and if he'd been quicker with his reactions he might have been able to save himself the loss. He was breathing hard by then, though, the adaptions to his armor, body, and neuroline in Phalanx Mode only having been able to do so much to help his adjustment to the form. He was still far from used to the shield, far from used to his heavier, slower movements and the toll of taking nearly every hit had on the muscle of his arms, shoulders, chest, and back. His Endurance spec might be through the roof now, sure—or at least compared to his Saber and Brawler forms both—but that hardly made it infinite, especially not against the onslaught that was Logan Grant.

So when Logan swung high, bringing Honoris horizontally around at Rei's head in a vicious, cleaving arc from the left, Rei didn't even think twice before jerking his towershield up and around to take the strike, thinking even as he did that the boy had made a mistake, had finally over-committed and left himself open.

He knew he'd lost the moment he caught the smallest hint of a grin flash across the Mauler's face.

CLANG!

The hit landed, but seemingly awkwardly, only the very top of the axe's blade catching the upper inside edge of the heavy shield. In almost the same instant, Grant twisted, his hands repositioning on the Device's long haft.

Rei didn't even have time to blink before the blunt metal of the handle whipped around, catching him squarely in the back of the skull.

WHAM!

An explosion of color across his vision mirrored the pain that coursed like fire into his neck, head, and down his back. Even as Rei staggered, though, half-blind and legs going half limp, he cursed his stupidity, cursed the trick. He saw it now, saw the trap he'd suantered right into. If he'd been of clearer mind he *knew* he would have noticed Grant's hand position on his axes haft as he'd swung, *knew* he could have caught the feint and taken advantage of it.

Instead, Logan had managed to haul his axe back toward his own body as he'd swung, making sure that only the very *top* of the Honoris' blade would catch Shido's unyielding shield, and used that high point of impact as the perfect fulcrum to snap the heavy haft around around from the other side.

Delivering the polished steel with neat—and *lethal*—precision.

Through the fireworks of pain and color, Rei thought he caught a clean streak of red arching at him, riding white steel like a torch carried atop a ivory chariot. The next thing he knew, Honoris impacted the armor of his chest once again, hitting him with all the power he suspected Logan could offer. This time Shido's armor gave, and the pain in Rei's head became nothing compared to the destructive agony that stole his mind and breath away as the phantom-called axe shattered the corded steel like paper, carrying right through Rei's body in a blow that—had Honoris been a true-called Device—would have likely left the uper third of his body hanging from the rest of his torso by nothing but a couple ribs and a spare few inches of flesh and skin.

He didn't even feel himself go flying under the force of the blow, didn't feel himself lose his grip on both shield and sword. Rei heard more than experienced the impact of his body hitting the white ground again, tumbling limply once, then twice.

It might have been more, but that was the moment the Arena finally called the match.

"Fatal Damage Accrued: 100%," the cool voice announced. "Winner: Logan Grant."

"Gaaahhhh!"

Rei's ability to breath returned in a desperate inhilation of air. The complex faceplate of his armor—a dozen small plates of solid black steel over a white underlay, crossed by two perpendicular slashes of dark blue vysetrium—did an even better job of calculating and

executing upon his oxygen needs that is old half-mask. Almost immediately his vision started to clear, and Rei found himself on his back on the ground, the brilliant white expanse of nothingness that was the Neutral Zone's "sky" already vanishing in a retreating wave as the simulation pixilated quickly out of being. The plainer white of the subbasement ceiling returned, ribbed by the heavy steel beams that helped keep it up, and Rei felt himself falling slowly, the warmth of the solid-light floor fading. He knew he'd reached the training room floor when he felt the coolness of the projection plating against his back through his sweat-dampened combat suit, and he had to admit amazement upon realizing that Logan had hit him *so* hard with that final strike it hadn't just demolished the *front* of his armor, but apparently also the *back* of it as it had exited his body.

"That strong *and* that fast?" Rei muttered to himself without looking away from the ceiling, considering the quick, twisting blow the Mauler had executed that had brought the rapid end to the match. "Come on. How is that *fair*?"

"You good, man?"

A form appeared above Rei then, wide outline dark against the ceiling. Squinting twice under his faceplate, Logan's knit brows finally came into focus, looking down on him with a touch of concern as he offered Rei a big hand, Honoris already recalled around his wrists. Whereas the Mauler's form had only seconds ago been highlight with a thin red line that indicated him as an "enemy", Shido's display now marked Logan in blue, denoting "ally".

"Yeah," Rei grunted, feeling the ache in his chest retreating rapidly as the effect of the Arena's simulated restrictions faded with the match's end. He reached up with an armored arm to accept the help up. "Just wondering why everyone *always* aims for my chest, is all..."

Hauling Rei and what was left of Shido's still-called armor up without so much as a wince of effort, Logan looked a little perplexed.

"Er... Biggest target...?" he offered, sounding like he wanted to be helpful but wasn't sure how Rei couldn't know such an answer already. "Safer than swinging at the head if you've got a clean shot, cause if you miss you leave yourself—"

"Yeah yeah," Rei chuckled as found his feet, nodding a thanks. "I know, it's just... Nevermind."

“Grant! Ward! Regroup for debrief!”

Together Rei and Logan looked around. With the fading away of the combat area, noise had returned to the world. It wasn't a roar of sound like they'd experienced after every match at Sectionals, but it was a good drum of action all the same since five other pairs of first years were in the process of fighting around them, training in their own groups on the other zones. The two of them were on Field 5, where the Phalanxes usually trained, and from where he stood Rei could make out Aria taking on Joy, Elizabeth Warren looking like she was struggling against Kay, and Jax fighting Melissa Borenson, a Duelist Rei wasn't sure he'd ever actually spoken to. There two other pairs beyond them on Field 1 and 2, but more immediately pressing was Catori Imala standing just outside the silver line that marked the edge of their own zone, hands on her hips and looking pleased, her form outline in a clean the white that Rei thought Shido used to identify “neutral” parties. She was a slender woman, in particular for her Type, with bright blue eyes and tanned skin complimented with long, orangish hair that was braided in a thin tail to hang all the way down to her waist at her back. Catching their eye, the Phalanx sub-instructor jerked her head back to indicate that Rei and Logan should both join her.

Behind her, Emily Gisham, Dai Xue, and Emily Hinks—all also outline in white—were watching them both with mouths hung so wide Rei thought they should be grateful the Arena filtration systems were good at keeping bugs out of the training halls.

Sighing inwardly, Rei recalled Shido with a word, his vision clearing of highlights his body lightening as the heavy plated armor whirled away in the simpler bands around his wrists. A faint sort of fog he barely noticed anymore lifted from his head, too, his specs returning to the baseline ‘Brawler’ numbers they always auto-set when he didn't specifically call on a different mode. Alongside Logan, he jogged over to the Lieutenant, doing as best he could to avoid the eyes of the others in their cross-training group. It was easier said than done without looking straight at Imala herself, because from every other field, too, Rei didn't miss students frequently glancing over their shoulders, or just outright staring. Even after he and Logan's *third* match—and Rei's third *loss* in a row, ironically—it was clear the shock hadn't worn off.

He'd expected it, sure, but it had been a minute since he'd weathered this kind of attention from the class.

He was quickly discovering he hadn't missed it in the least.

"Excellent fight, the pair of you," Imala told the two of them brightly, looking like she was working hard not to beam outright at Rei, for which he was grateful. "Grant, that finishing hit was stellar. Especially working against a shield like that. Ward, you did a *much* better job of letting yourself take the hits this time. I know you weren't ready for some of the followups, but one step at a time." She looked between the pair of them approvingly. "Down you get. We'll open the floor up to everyone."

"Thank you, ma'am!" Rei and Logan called together, saluting the woman before moving by to take their seats on the floor behind her, in the two empty red circles displayed on the projection plating beside the three currently occupied by the other members of their group.

"As I said, good fight!" Imala announced to everyone this time. "I know FDA is only set to 60% today to keep things moving, but Grant managed to score a full 100% in almost one go! A good example of a Mauler's destructive ability. They might be slower than most Types, but get caught even by a single solid hit, and it's probably game over for you."

She looked around at the Gisham, Dai, and Hinks, who'd all *finally* torn their eyes off of Rei when the instructor had faced them.

"Let's hear opinions! Something you thought each of them could do better, and something you thought they did well!"

All five hands rose, though the other three's were more tentatively brought up than Rei and Logan's.

"Gisham! You first!"

"I know you said no Abilities this training, but even without Overclock I think Grant could have overpowered Rei earlier on," Emily Gisham—one of 1-A's Brawler, and the only friend Rei had in his regular Type-group other than Sense—started a little uncertainly. "It's pretty clear Rei... uh... doesn't have a good handle on his shield. If Grant had leaned into that, I feel like he could have bulled through way earlier..."

“Agreed,” Imala said with another nod. “That’s a negative for each of them. What about positives?”

Gisham perked up a little at the affirmation, and spoke more clearly as she continued.

“Kinda two for one, but... Grant’s *super* versatile with his axe, but Rei is also really good at adapting to his changes. Grant’s uses *all* of his Device in a lot of ways I don’t know if I’d think of if I were a Mauler, but Rei was ready for almost everything when it came.”

Almost, Rei had to stop from muttering to himself, bring a hand up to rub absently at the back of his head with a faint wince.

Still, he was grateful for the commentary, although it fell short of anything he hadn’t heard before. For one thing, as this *was* their third match all the criticism from Gisham and the others on his fighting had always amounted to some rewording of “it’s pretty obvious he doesn’t know how to use his shield well”, which was—rather obviously—fair enough. His Phalanx Mode was new to him, Type Shift having upgraded to “Type Shift II” only a week ago now, and he’d had barely a couple of nights in even moderate fighting shape to really work with the new form. Catori Imala herself had been a godsend—though he didn’t think anyone needed to know that—having jumped on the chance to join Michael Bretz and Claire do Soto several times a week in Firesong’s extra evening training sessions the moment she’d heard about the evolution. If anything it was mostly *her* doing—with a lot of help from Aria—that Logan hadn’t just plowed right through Rei out the gate each match.

Still... he *was* getting better, and it helped that his Phalanx mode had manifested as a sword-weilding variant, allowing him to carry over a good chunk of the training and practice he’d been putting into his Saber form.

Then again... struggling with a new Type was hardly the only problem Rei was looking down the barrel of now, wasn’t it?

As Dai Xue—a Saber with grey-black hair a narrow eyes he’d only interacted with occasionally in training before, was called to give commentary—Rei couldn’t help but zoning out a bit, focusing instead on *not* turning around, *not* looking over his shoulder to see how many other people he could catch staring. Yes, he had indeed expected the attention, but that didn’t make him like it any more. It’d been some months since he’d stopped playing coy about

Shido's incredible ascent through the ranks, rising from his F8 on assignment to the C9 rank he and the CAD held today. For a time Rei had gotten by assuring people he was just "catching up", that the miserable E rank he'd entered Galens with—well below the lowest level *any* student had ever joined the school before—was naturely letting him climb that much faster since he was so far behind. He'd had to give that ducking line up some time ago, when he'd caught up, then *surpassed*, the majority of his class, but by that point there had been some level of normalcy in the events, some level of acceptance held by the other first years—and the rest of the Galens student body—that Rei was something of a freak of nature, but that was about it. He knew there had to have always been more whispers then he'd known about—ever since Aria had pulled together Firesong especially, he thought he'd been a little sheltered from all but the loudest voices raising questions and concerns about his unnatural growth—but just the same life had, shockingly, approached something like *normal* at the Institute for him following the Intra-Schools.

Now, though...

Rei sighed to himself again, making sure to look like he was paying attention as Imala praised Dai for his feedback and moved on to Emily Hinks, one of the 1-A's Lancers, and another Rei had only had occasion to talk to during training. It was odd, in fact, as he considered it, thinking about the other students in his class. Of the 26 in 1-A, Rei realized he was on speaking terms with less than *half* of them, and there were more than a few—like Melissa Borenson—he couldn't recall ever actually exchanging even a word with.

He suspected that distance from his class—especially with nosey trolls like Truant hanging around—would result in news of his newly evolved CAD—and obviously upgraded Ability—spreading like wildfire throughout the school before he'd even finish dinner that night.

Not that anything was ever gonna stop that from happening, he thought as Hinks said something about Rei needing to practice his footwork and how Grant should take advantage of the range Honoris offered him more often.

Still... it wasn't *all* bad news.

Rei finally let himself look over his shoulder, and it only took a second to find a flash of red hair and green light through the fields. The reaction to Shido's new form so far had been just a *little* bit more subdued than it could have been, he thought. He'd half-expected the class to stampede him, or at least swarm Field 5 at first manifestation of his Phalanx Mode and full-body armor. They'd done it before, surrounding Field 1 when he'd shattered all expectations during the Defense & Endurance testing portions of their quarterly parameter testing, so he didn't think he would have been surprised if the Neutral Zone had faded after that first lost and he and Logan had found themselves encircled by gaping faces. The gaping *had* been there, actually, but everyone had largely restrained themselves, all the other students sticking to hovering around their own fields to murmur and whisper to each other, casting shocked looks his way whenever they thought the sub-instructors weren't watching. It wasn't ideal, still, but it was better than it could have been.

And Rei had his suspicions he knew the reason.

As he watched Aria battle it out with Joy on Field 4 through the bodies of the seated students and standing instructors, he was doubly amazed by his girlfriend's pose and grace while she fought. For one thing he'd recently developed a newfound appreciation for the subtle complexities and difficulties that were unique to the combat styles of Phalanxes, but for another Aria was a *sight*. A week ago she'd presented as any other member of her Type might have in the middle C ranks. Hippolyta's red and gold armor had clad her limbs and arms, and her shield had been a little larger than her torso, with a simple spear tipped with a solid blade of green vysetrium to round out her Device. She had other tricks up her sleeve that made her a terror above pretty much any other first year, yeah, but she'd never *looked* anything but the part.

And then Sectionals had happened.

Even as he watched, Rei saw Aria slam Leron's blade—a straight sword of black and orange steel edged in glowing purple—aside with the handsome kite shield that now hung snugly from her left arm. Almost as tall as she was, the shield was a few inches short of being as wide as her shoulders, the steel rounded at the top but narrowing so dramatically down from there that Rei had seen her twice now use the point at its base to deal FDA in a fight. Her

spear, too, had changed, extending a little taller now and adding a slender spike of green vysetrium to its originally-blunt end, with an additional two more forming a lethal crossguard at the base of the now slightly-longer main blade. Indeed, even as he continued to watch the pair Rei saw Aria duck back away from another swing, putting space between herself and Joy even as she brought Hippolyta around in a wide, cruel arc. The Saber managed to get his sword between his thigh and the spear's blade, saving himself from losing a leg, but the extend point of the crossguard slid by the guard to slam into the steel armor, punching several inches through metal, muscle, and bone.

But even those added advantages of the spear and shield weren't worth blinking at compared to the difference in Hippolyta's *armor*.

As Joy roared in pain, staggering sideways, Aria blurred forward, leaving her spear lodged in the boy's leg and choosing instead to slide her hand up its haft as she moved. She struck him in the side of the face with an steel-clad shoulder, her Device having extend up both arms to encase her almost to her neck, leaving only her chest, back, and abdomen still bare. Joy's snarl was cut short by the impact, and he stumbled a single step back, unable go further with the spear still embedded in his leg. It wasn't enough space to slam the shield in into him, unfortunately, but it *did* give Aria just enough room to wrench away from the boy for a brief moment, and Rei winced preemptively.

When she whipped forward again—going so far as to pull Joy into her by the leg—the armored band that hugged Aria's forehead, temples, and cheeks took him in the bridge of the nose, and he fell even as Rei thought he heard the Arena announced “FDA: 68%” over the noise of the sub-basement.

Looking away again, Rei barely kept himself from grinning a little.

Still recovering as he'd been, he hadn't been able to be in class when Aria's new manifestation had apparently shocked 1-A the Monday before. The development of facial armor as a first year student had been unheard of before Rei, so for *Aria* to make an appearance with the same direction in the evolution of her CAD had caused waves according to Viv and Logan. In fact, the two of them had claimed they'd needed to act as pseudo-bodyguards in the lockerroom after training, and Rei had seen the lingering wonder and

astonishment on the faces of his classmates since he'd been able to return to class on light duty. He knew for a fact Aria hadn't loved it, but in the moment he couldn't help but be grateful to his girlfriend for shouldering the spotlight for the week.

It seemed likely it had been a good warmup for the reveal of Rei's Phalanx Mode and Shido's newest unreal manifestation.

And they haven't even seen Temporal Step yet...

It was as he pondered this fact, amusing himself imaging who would have fainted if they'd seen him *teleport* around Grant, that Rei's NOED lit up all it's own.

...

Processing combat information.

...

Calculating.

...

Results:

Strength: Adequate

Endurance: Lacking

Speed: Lacking

Cognition: Adequate

Offense: Adequate

Defense: Adequate

Growth: Not Applicable

...

Checking combat data acquisition.

...

Adequate data acquirement met.

Device initiating adjustments to:

Endurance.

...

Adjustment complete.

Endurance has been upgraded from Rank C4 to C5.

Oh, sweet! Rei thought excitedly, taking in the unexpected upgrade notification. Setting aside the fact that his Endurance was *always* lagging—at least in Brawler Mode—it was with less and less frequency that he was gaining any kind of quantitative value from sparring with the other members of Firesong. Shido seemed to have learned most everything it could from the squad, and Rei didn't actually think he could remember an upgrade coming from facing off with them for weeks. His progress since the return from Sectionals—which had seen his Strength, Speed, and Offense all get a bump—had only come from his practice fights against the subinstructors, Imala and Claire de Soto in particular.

Turning back towards the field, Rei dismissed the notification and made a quick spec request, trusting in the Lieutenant's ongoing discussion with Emily Hinks to keep her occupied just a little longer.

Specifications Request acknowledged.

...

Combat Assistance Device: Shido. User identification... Accepted.

Type: A-TYPE

Rank: C9

...

Identifying Preferred Mode.

Preferred Mode Identified as: BRAWLER-TYPE

...

User Attributes:

- Strength: C6

- Endurance: C5

- Speed: B1

- Cognition: C9

...

CAD Specifications:

- *Offense: C6*

- *Defense: C7*

- *Growth: S*

...

Display Additional Modes?

YES/NO

With a pleased little nod to himself, Rei let his gaze hover of the final line, and selected “YES”.

Additional Modes Request acknowledged.

Type: A-TYPE

Rank: C7

...

Additional Mode Identified as: SABER-TYPE

...

User Attributes:

- *Strength: C8*

- *Endurance: C8*

- *Speed: C5*

- *Cognition: C6*

...

CAD Specifications:

- *Offense: C8*

- *Defense: C8*

- *Growth: S*

...

Additional Mode Identified as: PHALANX-TYPE

...

User Attributes:

- *Strength: C8*
- *Endurance: B1*
- *Speed: C3*
- *Cognition: C3*

...

CAD Specifications:

- *Offense: C7*
- *Defense: B1*
- *Growth: S*

“Excellleeeent...” Rei said under his breath, only further pleased as he scanned the numbers a second time. Ever the balanced Type, his Saber form seemed to have converted the spec upgrade to a boost in Cognition, while Phalanx Mode continued—as expected—to seemingly prep him be able to fall into the *sun* with a jump in Endurance, charting him his second B1 on the list. His numbers still averaged lower than his CAD rank, but they were slowly closing the gap, his quick ascent steadily correcting the gap created by his Growth.

All in all, even if things were still slower than they’d been he’d first arrived at Galens, Rei sure as hell couldn’t complain.

Dismissing the request, Rei returned his attention to Catori Imala just as she wrapped up her thoughts on Hink’s feedback, the subinstructor having fortunately not caught on to Rei’s lack of attention. He wasn’t the only one with his thoughts elsewhere, though, because when the lieutenant turned away from the Lancer her enthusiasm at all their feedback seemed to fade a bit as her eyes skipped right by Rei to look beyond him.

He didn’t have to glance around to know what she was seeing.

“Okay, the Emilys are up next again! Gisham and Hinks! This’ll be your last fight, so I want to see even more improvement from the both of you. After that, Dai, we’ll have Cadet Grant kindly continue to pull double-duty as your partner.”

“Yes ma’am!” Gisham, Hinks, and Dai all announced together, the two girls getting to their feet and jogging for the field as they did. When they crossed the silver line that marked out the Dueling area Rei felt his stomach give the smallest of involuntary clenches, but it loosened once the pair were safely set and ready in their starting rings.

It wasn’t as bad when it wasn’t *him* pushing himself to step over the line...

Shoving that ugly thought aside, Rei instead finally decided to look around. To his right, he was unsurprised to find Logan sitting unmoving in his circle, his bare knees bent loosely to his chest, big arms wrapped around them. His gaze was distant once more, absent from the moment, and Rei debated waving him back to earth again. He’d done so twice that day already, and each time the Mauler had come to with a start and a frown followed by a subdued word of thanks.

In the end, Rei decided Imala’s choice to give the guy double duty as a partner—making up for Viv’s absence from the usually even-numbered class—was the greater kindness.

Viv...

Rei grimaced, doing his best to ignore the image of Viv floating in that tank, unmoving except for the hair drifting around her face and shoulders like she was nothing more than a cold corpse trapped in the water that had drowned her. He’d managed to forget for just a little while, managed to take advantage of the opportunity their instructors had offered him and Logan, and he wasn’t about to let himself slip into that dark place again just yet. Instead, he forced himself to focus back on their training, convincing himself that Gisham’s skill as one of the best Brawlers among the first years was worth examining and that watching Dai would be worth it just for a bit more study of standard Saber practices.

It took more effort than he would have liked.

Eventually, though, Rei got his head in the game, and the rest of class passed with him actually managing to do a pretty good job of paying attention. It helped that Emily Hinks knew her way around her spear, keeping Gisham and her paltry Brawler’s range at bay for almost ten minutes. Dai’s two-handed Saber variation had turned out to be a good matchup against Logan’s heavy-handed combat style, too, offering decent defense against the axe, though—yet again—only for a couple of minutes. After that, Rei was called up for the last bout, and

for a fourth time that afternoon he was pretty confident no one noticed a pause in his walk as he forced himself over the Dueling field line. It was getting easier every time, taking that step.

Or at least he was getting better at telling himself that.

His final match again Logan went the same way as the first three in the end, but Rei made a point throughout the 5 minute fight to be better prepared for the Mauler's tendency to follow up one hammering blow with another. He even managed his first *real* hit of the afternoon on Logan, giving himself an open shot at the boy's unprotected belly when he'd angled his shield so that a downward cut from Honoris skittered Shido's face to bury itself almost of full foot into the white of the Neutral Zone floor.

Sure, he'd been too slow to get his sword through stomach, slamming it to the hilt through Logan's side instead, and yes it *had* ended up costing him the weapon—and the match in the end—when the Mauler had twisted away with a snarl of pain, slamming a fist into Rei's overextended wrist to break his grip on Shido's hilt, but like Imala had said... one step at a time.

After that the class wrapped quickly, with the Lieutenant congratulating them all and commenting on how she'd be sure to tell each of the regular instructors how pleased she was with their progress throughout the day. Like the rest of the group, Rei turned away after saluting the woman in rather high spirits, feeling better than he had since the previous afternoon.

His good mood all but evaporated the moment he noticed much of the rest of the class, dismissed at the same time as they'd all been, barely moved from their places around their own fields.

With almost every lingering eye... trained on him.

Rei forced himself not to stop short as he strode across the sub-basement floor towards the hall. He also managed not to look around to make sure Logan was with him, though he thought he might have if he hadn't made out the boy's heavy, now-familiar footsteps close at hand. It was weirdly comforting, having him at his back, and Rei couldn't think of when exactly the transition had happened to hating the idea of Logan *Grant* breathing down his neck to being grateful to have him there.

Still, big and imposing as the guy was, Logan's effect on his confidence as he approached the training room exit couldn't compare to catching sight of Aria jogging towards them from her field, scowling back at the lingerers from among her own group as she did.

"Hey, how'd it go?" she asked quietly when she reached the pair of them, stepping in beside Rei and looking between the two boys with poorly-masked concern.

He knew all too well that she wasn't asking about the cross-training.

"As well as could have," he answered under his breath, still watching the stares of those students who didn't move even as the three of them passed by. "I was thinking a minute ago that I probably owe you dinner, actually."

Aria looked surprised at that.

"I mean... sure?" she answered tentatively, eyeing him. "But why?"

"Cause I think you and Hippolyta gave Shido and I a pretty big parachute by turning up to class first this week..."

"Ooooh..." Aria said in understanding, glancing back at the training area briefly as they stepped into the hall, the stone floor feeling almost warm against their bare feet compared to the flat steel of the projection plating. "You know... I hadn't thought of that..." She considered a moment as they headed for the locker rooms, then looked at Rei sidelong. "...I hope you know the mess hall doesn't count."

Rei snorted, rolling his eyes. "Sure. Deal."

"And the mall food court doesn't either."

"Just the food court? Perfect. Chips and reheatable hotdogs from that convinence store near Swallowtail it is. Heard they've got a couple nice vintages of orange soda."

"You know... I think you were more romantic when we *weren't* officially dating..."

"The passage of time has hardened my heart."

"It's been a week."

Rei grinned, about to answer back when there was a low cough from behind them. He cringed alongside Aria as they both looked slowly back to find Logan watching the pair of them with a raised eyebrow.

“Do me a favor and at least keep it bottled till dinner?” he grumbled as they reached the locker rooms. “Today’s just... not the day to feel like a third wheel. Cool?”

“Cool,” Rei and Aria echoed together, equally mortified and snapping forward again just as they reached the locker room.

Still... Rei didn’t miss the hint of Aria’s smile even as he hid his own.

The doors slid open for them, and stepping inside Rei once more had to pretend he didn’t notice the subdued level of the conversations being held along the rows they passed as they made for their habitual lockers. Ordinarily the chatter and calls for dinner from their classmates was a fun hubbub of excitement and noise, but he the quiet was expected, even as it held after the three of them had showered and changed back into their regulars in short order. From there they exited as quickly as they could while doing their best not to draw attention to themselves, quietly agreeing together to head straight for the mess, where Chancery had already sent a group message to let them know she and Catcher would be waiting for them.

They made it all they way to the elevator lobby on the Arena’s main level before they were caught.

“Yeeeeeah... You’re not getting away *that* easy, buddy.”

Halfway across the polished floor of the underworks chamber, Rei, Aria, and Logan all came up short. Looking around with trepidation, Rei had to admit to more than a little relief to find Sense leaning with feigned casualness against the wall by the car doors, watching three of them quizzically. He wasn’t alone, but the fact that Kay and Gisham were the ones waiting closest to him made Leron Joy’s lingering presence at their backs almost tolerable.

Beside Rei, Aria snorted.

“Did the four of you *sprint* to get changed and beat us up here?” she asked, sounding half-amused, half-annoyed.

“*Yup!*” Sense cheerfully answered without so much as a pause, and sure enough Rei thought he could see the glint of sweat on the boys clean-shaven head as the Brawler pushed off the wall and moved to join them. “Even skipped showering.”

“Oh *wonderful*,” Aria muttered dryly. It was Rei, though, that she was paying attention too, giving him a readable look from the corner of her eye.

What do you want to do? she was asking even as Sense and the others reached them.

Before Rei could answer, though, the bald boy’s expression grew serious, and his tone was quiter as he spoke again.

“Wasn’t about to let you run off without *some* kind of explanation, but I figured you probably wouldn’t want too many ears around, you know?”

Rei smirked, experiencing a bittersweet appreciation for the thought.

“Considerate,” he said with a humorless laugh. Then he sighed, turning away from the group but motioning for them to join as he started heading for the tunnel again. “But yeah, come on. Not like I was expected to get off scott free, I guess.”

“Oh *don’t* pretend like you’d rather be interrogated by anyone else,” Kay Sandree said with a snicker, falling into step in the middle of the group. “You should have *seen* Truant during your first fight. She was in my group. I didn’t know eyes could *get* that big.”

“That girl *seriously* needs to mind her business more,” Gisham added, though Rei thought he could feel her eyes on his back as she spoke. “One of these days she’s going to piss off the wrong person.”

“Pretty sure that ship sailed a while ago,” Logan answered with a growl, and the momentary quiet that followed told Rei everyone but he and Aria were probably blinking around at the Mauler in surprise.

That, whether fortunately or unfortunately, was when Sense decided to broach the topic, jogging up a step to stand on Rei’s other side just as they reached the bottom of the stairs that lead up the Arena seating.

“Okay dude... Let’s hear it.”

Taking the first of the steps, Rei chewed on the inside of his cheek for a moment, thinking.

Then he started to speak, no longer pulling any of the punches he once had whenever Shido did something incredible.

It felt good, in an odd way, to unload on listening ears that *weren't* Aria's or the rest of Firesong's. He didn't say anything about Shido's S-Ranked Growth, obviously—not that he thought Sense or the others would believe him without outright showing them his specs—and it was easy to avoid the subject of Temporal Step given that was still a locked-down secret, as was any mention of Shido's newly-discovered effect on the rest of the squad that even *Logan* didn't know about. Everything else, though, Rei dove headfirst into, enjoying the liberty granted to him by the growing lack of need—much less desire—to hide anymore.

He told Sense and the others about how Sectionals had been incredible for Shido's development even *before* that final Saturday, even moreso than it had been for everyone else at the tournament. He told them about the Dueling finale against Aria, and forced himself to go into as much detail about the attack that had interrupted them as he could get himself to, ignoring both the knot that formed in his stomach as he spoke and the abrupt paleness of his girlfriend's face beside him. He told them about how he'd fallen unconscious and come to with the notification of not only Shido's jump straight from C7 to C9, but also of the Device's evolution and the adaptation of Type Shift. He didn't go so far as to explain how no less than *three* of their subinstructors were providing Firesong with specialized training, but he *did* at least explained that he'd been working on getting a grasp of his new Phalanx Mode ever since he'd been able to stand without shaking, which admittedly hadn't been very long.

By the time the seven of them were out of the Arena, across campus and the fading winter day, and entering the mess hall again, Sense and the others all shared the very expression Rei thought Kay must have seen Leda Truant sporting so unflatteringly.

“Dude...” was all Sense managed to get out as the heavy glass doors closed behind them, welcoming them fully into the warmth of the tropical quarter of the arboretum. “Rei...”

“Yuuup,” was the only answer Rei gave, looking around for Catcher and Chancery as Aria and Logan did the same.

“I guess that explains why you were out of class earlier this week... I mean we figured you were hurt. We all *saw* that fight on the feeds, but...” Sense shook his head in disbelief as Gisham and Kay did the same behind him. “How... why would—?”

“Did they figure out who attacked you?”

It was—completely unsurprisingly—Leron Joy who cut right to the chase. If Sense was to be believed, the Saber was a decent guy on the whole, but looking passed the Brawler at him Rei found nothing more than the usually sour expression and disappointed frown Joy always seemed to reserve exclusively for him. He was one of the holdouts, Rei knew, one of the first years who still seemed unable to come to terms with the fact that Rei had ever made it into Galens, but at least the guy wasn't challenging him outright with his question this time.

Then again, Rei wasn't the only one who'd taken a disliking for the Saber over the course of the last half year.

"If they had, don't you think that's something Rei would have said?" Aria answered coldly, abandoning her search to narrow her eyes at Joy.

The Saber blanched slightly.

"I-I mean... I don't know," he stammered in hurried answer, looking distinctly less sure of himself than he had when it was *Rei's* eyes he'd had to meet. "Maybe they *did* tell you, and you just didn't—"

"I see Chancery," Logan interrupted him, pointing into the crowd of students around them.

"Perfect. Let's go eat." Aria didn't pause before taking Rei by the hand and stalking off towards the food line, in the direction the Mauler had indicated, pulling him along with her.

"Wha—? Oh. Sure." Rei, taken by surprise, waved back in hurried farewell to Sense, Gisham, and Kay. "Catch you guys later."

"Y-yeah! Later!" Sense called back with forced cheer.

His expression, though—something between disbelieving and shell-shocked—barely shifted as Aria tugged Rei into throng, Logan right behind them.

"Kinda mean just to leave them like that, isn't it?" he asked her once his shorter legs caught up to her pace. "That was a lot to dump on them..."

"Oh *don't*," she growled without looking back at him, shouldering her way—more aggressively than usual—between Gillian North and Lena Jiang, the latter of whom scowled as they passed. "I *really* don't like that guy. Like... *really*."

"Who, Joy? Come on. He was actually asking reasonable questions for once."

“Doesn’t mean he’s not still an *ass*.”

“Fair enough.” Rei grinned as he dodged around the pair of food-laded trays Conrad Fae was balancing in each hand. “But I’m preeetty sure he paid his dues forward today. You got paired with him today, didn’t you? How many times did you shove his face into the ground?”

“*Four*,” Aria grumbled. “And and twenty time more wouldn’t have been enough.”

Rei laughed, then caught sight of Logan shaking his head at his back.

“What’s up?”

“Nothing.” The Mauler grimaced slightly. “Just glad you guys weren’t dating when *I* was the ass, is all...”

Though he couldn’t see her face as she led him, Rei thought the comment might have alleviated Aria’s mood just the slightest, because she didn’t say anything until they reached the food line. There he was surprised to *actually* find Chancery waving them down—he’d assumed Logan had made up having caught sight of her just to diffuse the situation—with Catcher on his tip toes beside her with neck craned, trying to find them through the crowd too.

The moment he saw them, the Saber’s expression went stony.

Oh... Right... Rei thought miserably.

“You guys get food yet?” Aria asked, letting go of Rei’s hand as they reached the pair.

“Not yet!” Chancery answered almost-cheerfully, clearly trying—and failing—to hold up a smile. “Wanted to wait for you guys.”

Aria nodded gratefully. “I wanted to talk about evening training, so that works out, thanks. Maybe get us back on the ball after we skipped this morning.”

“Sure thing.” The Lancer’s voice was still a little *too* happy-go-lucky. “I’m definitely game. Assuming... uh... everyone else is...?”

She’d been clearly trying to look only at Aria, but at the question her eyes lifted passed Rei, her gaze a little concerned. Logan, to his credit, didn’t let the silence linger.

Or at least tried not to.

“Look, guys...” He started quietly, but his low voice carried well over the rushing and conversations all around them. “I already told Rei and Aria, but I’m sor—”

“I’m getting in line.”

Catcher's tone was waspish as the Saber turned on his heel and moved to join the row of other first years waiting patiently for their turn to order dinner at the automated distribution kiosks that dished out the food.

"Hold on! Catcher!" Chancery called out after him, but he didn't turn around. Even after she shouted after him a second time he continued to ignore her, and she looked back at Rei, Aria, and Logan almost apologetically.

"Sorry," she mumbled, seeming to have trouble meeting their eyes. "I had a double-class with him this afternoon and... Well, he's still in a pretty bad mood..."

"Clearly." Rei frowned after Catcher, watching him step into line with his hands shoved into the pockets of his black slacks, head down and shoulders hunched.

"It's fine," Logan said quietly from behind him, and Rei looked back to see the Mauler standing in much the same fashion, his straight black hair hanging across downcast eyes. "I get it..."

"Let's just... give him some time?" Aria offered a little weakly, glancing between the two boys.

Logan only nodded at that, then turned and lumbered slowly off to join the queue himself, some five or six people behind Catcher.

Rei appreciated the Mauler's apology from earlier in the afternoon, as well as the explanation. Much so, even. Still, he also understood Catcher's apparent unwillingness to hear so much as a word from Logan's mouth for the time being. Of everyone, the Saber had always been the most reserved about their former nemesis 'joining the club', so to speak—even moreso than Rei—so Rei was careful not to push Catcher to participate in the table conversation after they sat down to eat. Instead, he sat between him and Chancery, trying to silently assure his friend of his understanding even as he made an effort to involve Logan—who sat on the opposite corner—in the chatter mostly carried by Aria and the Lancer.

It made dinner as somber an affair as lunch had been, and Rei was drained by the time they finished and started talking about heading back to the dorm for a break before the extra training hours they had planned for the evening. He found himself thinking of Viv again, and realized his concern for her suddenly extended beyond just his best friend's *physical* health. To

Rei, the day was proving Viv's presence was as integral to Firesong as anyone else's, and he once again felt that strange, sad anger at the fact she could ever—*ever*—have thought otherwise.

That, almost ironically, was when the notification pinged his NOED, and glancing at it Rei's breath caught in his throat.

A second later, he was kicking himself for even thinking about how *anyone else's* actions had the potential to put the squad in jeopardy.

“Rei?”

Aria's sounded nothing more than a little concerned as she looked at him, but Rei winced like she'd cracked a whip by his ear just the same. They'd all been in the process of standing when the alert had hit him, and he'd frozen in the middle of donning his cap again with one hand and picking up his tray and dishes with the other. Aria wasn't the only one to notice, either, with Chancery, Logan, and even Catcher turning to him curiously now.

It was Aria, though, whose eyes he found, and Rei felt himself start to sweat as he met them through his frame.

“Uh...” he started lamely. “Give... Give me sec?”

Aria's gaze narrowed suddenly, concern replaced all at once by the hint of suspicion.

“Reeeei...?” she repeated, drawing out his name dangerously this time.

She seriously was starting to know him *too* well.

Rei, though, ignored her, choosing instead to open the message Ueno Jasper had just sent him, and finding only three short lines of text.

As promised:

Friday, after your afternoon combat training.

See you then.

Rei's hands were tinglin, as he read the missive a second time. Friday. *Friday.*

“Oh boy...” he muttered to himself, mind racing between a cold sort of elation and a hot terror that he knew had nothing to do with Jasper apparently having indeed kept her word.

The immanent danger, after all, was the more immediate concern.

“Reeeiii,” Aria growled for a third time, putting down her tray to lean over the table at him, the fractured emerald of her eyes flashing. “I *know* that look. *Too* well... What did you do?”

“Wh-Who says I did anything??” Rei got out with a stammered laugh, trying for a grin and achieving what he suspected was nothing but pained fear.

“Reidon Ward, you’ve got *guilt* written across you face as bright as a neon sign.” Aria’s voice was suddenly honey, that sharp, cool sweetness she only used when she wanted to get a *very* specific point across. “So please. *Don’t* treat me like an idiot.” Her eyes were practically ablaze now. “What. Did. You. Do?”

Rei tried for another laugh, only to hear it come out weak and strained. He felt like a mouse trapped in a cage with an angry tiger. He looked to the others, trying to scream ‘Help!’ with his eyes, but Logan and Catcher were both now examining the glass of the nearby dome wall like it was the most interesting thing in the world, while Chancery’s expression was stony, clearly falling in with Aria.

After a second, Rei caved.

“I... uh... It’s possible I... uh... forgot to... to mention something...”

“And what might that be?” the venom-laden honey pressed.

Rei gulped, and wondered how much trouble he’d get into if he had to plow through the evergreens at his back to make a quick escape. A night in the brig was surely worth keeping his head, right?

“I-If I tell you,” he answered weakly, “you have to *promise* not to kill me. Okay?”

Aria’s smile, a wicked, evil thing that only terrified him all the more, was *pure* fire.

CHAPTER 9

“You. Did. *WHAT?*!”

Rei winced, looking around in concern to make sure the back corner of the Kanes lobby he’d picked to have the conversation was still deserted. With most everyone at dinner they’d only caught the curious eyes of a few people coming back and forth from their rooms, but Rei still worried Aria’s voice would soon raise high enough to be heard across *campus*, much less inside the dorm.

“Aria, could you keep your—?”

“Oh no! No no *no!*” Aria was standing in front of him with one finger shoved into his chest, having leapt up—almost as soon as he’d opened his mouth—from the couch to his left where she’d initially sat beside Logan. “You do *not* get to tell me what to do right now! *Definitely* not! Explain! *Explain*, Rei! What the *hell* were you thinking?!”

“I was thinking that I didn’t have a *choice*,” Rei told her calmly, working not to raise his own voice in answer. “I was thinking that it was this, or you and I would probably be kissing Galens goodbye at the end of the year.”

“But it was *handled!*” Aria dropped her finger from his chest to wave heatedly over his shoulder. “Uncle Ram said he would handle it! Galens was going get us more support! We were probably going to have more time with Imala and all of them, and I *bet* we could have gotten special permission to push curfew a bit! Why would you—?!”

“Aria!” Rei cut across her so sharply she flinched in surprise. “Do you *really* think that was going to be enough?? For *Intersystems*?? Do you *really* think so??”

Aria’s mouth closed with a snap, and she didn’t answer for a long moment. Her eyes, though, were still all fury as she stared at him. Rei refused to look away.

When she spoke again, it was through gritted teeth.

“You didn’t have to do this... You didn’t... We could have found a better way...”

“*What* better way?” he asked her evenly. “Galens could give us everything it has, and you *know* it probably wouldn’t be enough. Not for all of us. Not for all of us *as a squad*...”

He emphasized those last three words, intent on reminding her of the true parameters of the problem. Before the catastrophe of Viv's training accident, Rei had laid in bed for half the night turning over this *exact* problem. He and Aria were one thing. They would be able to rise to the challenge—had already *begun* to rise to the challenge. He'd believed that 24 hours before, but he was endlessly more sure of that fact now that they knew without a doubt that Shido was influencing the CADs around it, or at least those closest to it. If he and Aria continued to train together, Rei couldn't believe her Device wouldn't develop a similar 'link' like Gemela's. And while they still didn't entirely know what that meant, Hippolyta's most recent evolution was very likely the result of that influence already, which could only indicate even greater changes once that link manifested given what Abel had divulged. Gemela had a *User-Unique* Ability, even if they didn't know what it was yet.

Yes, if things kept going the way they were, Rei truly believed that he and Aria—and now *Viv*, more than likely—could have overcome, even if that meant carrying the rest of Firesong to victory on their backs. But this wasn't what was being asked of them.

No... that wasn't right.

This wasn't what was being *demand*ed of them.

If Aria had an answer for him, she didn't get it out in time before Catcher raised his own voice.

“Okay, hold up! *Hard* pause on the fireworks, please!”

Rei and Aria turned together to find the Saber sitting with his hand raised to interrupt. He was on the couch opposite Logan's, seated beside Chancery, and of the three of them looked like the only one currently capable of speech.

Then again, his eyebrows were almost to his hairline as he pressed on in the pause he'd created for himself.

“Rei, you need to back up,” he said, his tone all forced calm. “Like... *way* up. Forget Kamiya for a second. *Intersystems*? What are you talking about? And you'll be 'kissing Galens goodbye at the end of the year'? What the hell does *that* mean??”

“*Forget* Kamiya?!” Aria snarled, and not for the first time Rei thought he could just barely feel a subtle pulse of something like heat ripple away from her as she whirled on the blond

boy to take an angry step towards him. “How is he supposed to *‘forget’* Kamiya, Catcher?! Don’t make me remind you that *you* were the one who—!”

“*Just for a second!*” the Saber repeated, dropping his hand halfway with palm out to stop her from coming closer. “You bet your *ass* he’s going to explain himself—especially given the three of us are the only ones here who know everything about that offer—” he indicated Rei, Aria, and himself quickly “—but you *need to go back.*” He looked to Rei again. “You’re... leaving Galens?”

Rei shook his head firmly.

“*No,*” he said with as much confidence as he could muster. “Or at least I’m *trying not to.*”

“... Sorry, I’m not following.”

“You’re not the only one,” Chancery finally managed to mutter, still staring at Rei.

“It’s not by choice,” he assured them. “*Definitely* not by choice.”

And with that he gave Catcher, Chancery, and Logan the rundown of the situation, starting from the very beginning.

He spent the better part of a half hour telling them about his and Aria’s meeting with her father the night before, a reveal that initially earned them both equal measures of shock and anger from the others that they hadn’t said anything earlier. Rei didn’t think trying to tell the three that he’d honestly completely forgotten about it all in the wake of the situation with Viv would help, but they quieted down anyway when he went on to explain *why* the general had claimed to have called the meeting. He told them about the transfer orders whose guillotine he and Aria were now standing beneath, and about the not-so-theoretical involvement of Central Command *in* those orders. He explained how General Laurent had told them first years would, for the first time in the history of the SCTs, be granted a bracket at the System and Intersystem collegiate championships, and told them them what the man had laid out as the conditions for their success. They had to win. All of them. The whole thing. Firesong had to come out on top of the first year *Intersystem* tournament, and had to manage it *as a squad.*

In the end, Catcher, Chancery, and Logan were left sitting in mutually-stunned silence— with Aria having dropped down again beside the Mauler to sit with arms crossed in outrage—

and only *then* did Rei brave bringing up the offer from the Kamiya Corporation that he had decided to accept.

Chancery and Logan—who'd only learned of the existence of this offer the weekend before, much less any of its details—were slack-jawed by the time Rei finished explaining the extra conditions he'd so firmly negotiated for, at which point even Catcher was mouthing at the air. Rei laid out how Kamiya would reveal who it was that was pulling the strings of the offer, who it was that so clearly wanted to bring Rei into the fold no matter the cost. If he was right in assuming the meaning of Jasper message, that meeting was now set.

And then he laid out how Firesong as a *whole* would be part of the deal, not just Rei himself.

"We're... sponsored?" Chancery was the first to speak after this reveal, the question coming like she couldn't believe her ears. "All... *all* of us?"

"All of us," Rei echoed in answer.

There was a moment of dumbfounded silence, all eyes on Rei except for Aria, who was glaring at a nearby pillar with such intensity he was worried the polished cement would soon start to melt.

"Hold on..." Logan started up next, seeming to shake himself back into the present as he looked between Rei and Aria uncertainly. "I'm confused. The Central thing I'm not really surprised by, all things considered, but—"

"You're *not*?" Chancery demanded weakly.

Logan's face darkened. "No, I'm not. Central Command... They aren't all sunshine and rainbows. I know that first hand..."

Chancery went quiet again at that, indicating her understanding only with a numb nod, which let the Mauler continue.

"Again: Central, I'm not surprised by. As for the new first-year brackets... If anything, that's smart of them, right? Rei's name is starting to make waves. You can see it on the feeds, and not just the local planetary news. The cat stuck a paw out of the bag, and there's no shoving it back in. Not after what happened at Sectionals."

Rei felt that familiar tightness in his stomach, and without looking away from Logan he thought he saw Aria flinch, too.

“Given all that—plus everything with Aria and Hippolyta—first-year brackets gives the ISCM a way to control the rumors a bit more. Or at least make the public reveals on their own schedule. So all of that I can follow.”

“And it’s another challenge for Rei and Shido...” Catcher added from the other couch with a thoughtful nod, seemingly forgetting—at least for the time being—that he wasn’t speaking to Logan at the moment.

“It is,” the Mauler agreed, faintly eager at Catcher’s accession. But then his face stilled, and he scrutinized Rei carefully. “But this *sponsorship*.” He seemed to be measuring his words. “The offer? Okay... Sure. I said it before: a *first year* has *never* gotten an offer. Not that I’ve been able to find, and I’ve *looked*. But... you’re kinda a ‘first’ in a lot of ways, given everything. And that gets more obvious by the day. *But,*” he frowned, looking from Rei to Aria. “what I *don’t* get, on the other hand, is why you guys are still making this out to be a *bad* thing...?”

His eyes didn’t leave her this time, pressing silently for an answer. It was a fair question, too. By all accounts a offer for *any* student was rare and great cause of celebration. It meant money, training, probably fame. Though it was never said out loud, statistically it even provided an amount of unspoken leverage when it came down to whether or not a User was allowed to become one of those 1 in 5 permitted to pursue a career in the SCTs rather than be drafted for the front lines of the war. If anything, an offer like the one being extended to Rei would have left any other student—first year or not—skipping for joy.

And yet, despite that and Logan’s hanging question, it become clear pretty quick that Aria had no intention of answering, choosing instead to clench her arms tighter to her chest and turn even further away from them all.

“There’s... a bit more to the situation,” Rei started tentatively, not sure of how exactly to broach the subject.

“Oh yeah. Sure. Cause of *course* there is.” Chancery had regained her voice in full, speaking with a sigh as she sagged in her seat to put her face in her hands, elbows resting on her knees. “Honestly, Rei,” her words came muffled, grumbled into her palms, “I think I’m

just going to have to quit being overwhelmed by you and that *stupid* CAD. At this point it's getting bad for my health."

"You're still surprised?" Catcher asked with a snort. "I gave up on sanity months ago."

Rei decided not to mention that—even as he said this—the Saber was still staring at him like he'd sprouted several additional arms.

Chancery only gave a dry laugh from between her fingers before dropping her hands to look up again.

"So? What is it?" she asked Rei, sounding almost exhausted. "Actually no." She held up a hand to stop him when he opened his mouth to answer. "Let me guess. You have to let Kamiya study Shido so they can make clones of it somehow."

"Uh... No..." Rei answered uncertainly. "I—"

"You have to give them rights to your DNA so they can make clones of *you*."

"No," Rei said again. "I—"

"It's a lifetime contract and they're just locking you in early. Smart."

"No." Rei tried a third time. "I'm not *sure*, but—"

"You're the long-lost heir of the Kamiya fortune, destined by fate to rule the family dynasty."

Chancery actually grinned to herself at that one.

At least until Rei didn't say anything.

"Wait... *Seriously?*?"

Rei offered her a pained shrug. "I... don't know about 'heir', but..."

"*But?*?" Chancery and Logan demanded together, both gaping at him again.

It was Aria who answered, though, apparently deciding that was the moment to reenter the conversation.

Even if she still refused to look back around at them.

"We think he's part of the Kamiya family," she said, and Rei could tell she hadn't yet managed to unclench her jaw. "Now that he's making a name for himself, they've decided they want him back."

The silence that followed this was as heavy as it was cold.

“Rei...” Logan started slowly as he looked back around, eyes narrowing. “That true...?”

“I don’t know.”

It was an honest answer, at the very least, and the best that Rei could offer for the time being. He realized abruptly that he’d crossed his own arms at some point, and he forced himself to relax them, shoving his hands into his pockets instead in favor of studying the crimson carpet beneath his boots.

“It seems likely,” he continued after a second. “I had a feeling when the Kamiya rep turned up—who is *terrifying*, by the way.”

“They threatened you?” Catcher asked, surprised. “I never heard about—”

“No, no, nothing like that.” Rei shook his head. “You’ll get it, if you ever meet her. But *anyways...*” He lifted his gaze to look between Chancery and Logan. “I had a feeling, after the offer. It was... big. Like *way* big.”

“*Too* big,” Aria muttered furiously.

Rei nodded. “Yeah. *Way* too big. They were tossing out crazy stuff. Housing, medical care, training. They even offered a *million* credits a year as a base stipend. And expenses on *top* of that.”

“Holy—!” But Chancery caught herself, shutting up in favor of listening intently again.

“Exactly,” Rei agreed once more, pulling up his frame. “It was... almost desperate? Like they were willing to throw everything they could at me to get me to sign then and there. Put me on edge—put *all* of us on edge.” He gestured to Aria and Catcher as he made a quick search of the feeds. “Viv, too. It was so crazy we ended up sending the contract to Aria’s brother and Catcher’s mom for them to look at. Don’t think we ever heard from him, but *she* got back to us with... uh...” he looked at the Saber sidelong through the display “... enthusiasm?”

Catcher looked like he had to work hard not to facepalm at the memory.

“So it was legit?” Chancery allowed herself the quiet question.

“Apparently.” Rei nodded again, finding what he was looking for and screenshotting it before cropping it down and pulling up the final share commands. “But even if it hadn’t been, everything they were offering plus some other clues—like their name—just... had my hackles

up. So....” he sent the file to Chancery and Logan, whose eyes flashed briefly when they received to notification, “I went digging.”

When he’d shown Viv that first time, he remembered sending her the full list of the Kamiya Corporation’s executive profiles, knowing she would find the same thing he had. This time, he’d cut to the chase, so neither the Lancer or Mauler were long in studying the single headshot and bio he’d sent.

“Oh... Damn...” Chancery was the first to get out, purple-green irises alive with the glow of the display as she took in Kamiya Hiroto’s features.

“His eyes...” Logan growled.

“Yup,” Aria snarled quietly. “They’re *Rei’s* eyes.”

“But... that *could* be a coincidence, right?” Chancery offered tentatively, closing out of the CEO’s profile with a blink. “There’s got to be *tons* of people with grey eyes... right?”

“Probably,” Rei acknowledged. “But the company is based in Tokyo, on Earth. And the Kamiyas seem to be old Japanese blood, which might explain my looks.” He gestured absently at his face. His eyes weren’t as narrow or angled as Hiroto Kamiya’s, but they were at least moreso than any else’s present. “My name—my *first* name, at least—is Japanese, too. Hell, so is Shido’s.”

The words were sour in his mouth, and he remembered briefly the time even Valera Dent had pointed this out, when she’d asked him if he’d known what his CAD’s name meant.

‘Seed’, he’d told her. ‘Shido means ‘seed’.’

“Combine all that with the offer...” Catcher finished for him, looking himself between Chancery and Logan now. “Well... you get the gist.”

“Yeah...” Logan muttered, teeth partially bared. “Yeah... I guess we do...”

Rei watched him in confusion for second, then realized that *Logan*, of all of them, would probably be the *most* sensitive to the antics of a toxic family.

For a long while after that they all sat and stood in silence, no one looking at each other as they processed, some for the first time, some for the hundredth. Rei was just starting to feel like he should try and say something more, actually, when Aria abruptly regained her feet and whirled on him.

“All that...” Her voice was quiet now, but her fists were clenched so tight at her sides they were shaking. “You remember *all that*... and you *still* took the offer...”

“Aria, I didn’t see another—”

“Did you *try* to?” Even whispered, the question cut him short, and Rei was alarmed to realize her green eyes were glistening. “Did you even *try*? You could have *asked*, Rei... You could have at least *asked* what we thought—what *I* thought—before doing this...”

Rei swallowed, but he held his ground. “You would have tried to talk me out of it...”

She stared at him for a long, tense moment.

“You’re damn right, I would have,” she finally got out, her voice suddenly hoarse. “You’re damn right. You always... Why do you *always* have to take everything on yourself...?”

That was when the tear fell, a single, miserable line that cut through her freckles and down to the slender line of her chin.

And Rei felt his heart break.

“Aria, I—” he started, lifting a hand with the intent of wiping her cheek dry.

Catching his wrist, though, she pushed it aside, shaking her head as she stepped by him instead.

“I don’t want to talk to you right now,” he barely heard her say as she passed. “Just leave me alone, Rei.”

“Aria!” he called after her, toeing at desperate now, watching her back as she made for the stairs. “Come on! What else was I supposed to do???”

She didn’t answer him. Instead she reached the steps and started taking them two at a time.

Her head had just about to vanish above the edge of the ceiling when she stopped with one hand on the banister.

“East Center in thirty minutes!” she called out, her voice strong again, but still not looking around at any of them. “Anyone who is a *second* late can assume they’re sitting out the evening.”

And then she was gone.

Rei stared after her for a long time, feeling half lost, half angry, and all *totally* miserable. No one spoke behind him. No one even moved. Not for a full minute.

Then Catcher let out a breath of frustration.

“Rei...” he began with a huff, and Rei could hear him getting to his feet. “I’ll cop to it. I *was* the one who said you should at least *look* at the offer seriously. Maybe that puts a little bit of this on me.” He came to stand beside him, and Rei could tell he, too, was looking at the stairs Aria had vanished up. “But *that... That’s* on you man.”

“... Yeah?”

Rei had meant to sound defiant, to sound angry.

Instead, he was pretty sure the question came out as nothing but sad.

“Oh, yeah.” Catcher patted him on the shoulder. “If Viv were here, she’d kick your ass.”

“Then she’d be the world’s biggest hypocrite,” Rei grumbled without enthusiasm, hearing Chancer and Logan get up behind them too.

“Oh definitely.” Catcher nodded sanctimoniously. “But for this? For trying to do it all yourself? *Again?*” He gave a sad grunt, then started to head for the stairs too. “She’d *still* kick your ass.”

Had he been alone in his office, Colonel Rama Guest might just have dropped his head to the handsome surface of desk before him and banged it repeatedly against the polished wood in frustration. Rereading the notice on the smart-glass tablet for a third time, the urge only grew, as did the contemplation of how unlikely it was that his present company would judge him for such a tantrum.

In the end, Rama managed to refrain, choosing instead to press thumb and forefinger of his free hand against his eyes in an attempt to stave off a brewing headache as he held the pad out with the other.

“Take this before I break another one of these damn things.”

A light chuckle answered him even as he felt the tablet pulled lightly from his grasp.

“That would make... what... *three* this year?” the woman asked, amused. “Probably for the best. Eventually the treasurer would have come for your head.”

“You know as well as I do that XXXX XXXXX doesn’t have the balls to look me in the *eye*, much less yell at me for my expense list,” Rama growled into the dark of his still-shut eyes. “Let the Major *try*.”

Only another laugh answered this, and with a grunt Rama pulled his face from his hand to squint blearily around.

Maddison Kent was only slightly more disheveled than usual, a feat of impressive will and ability given the *hell* that had been the last few days. In fact, had anyone but a select few taken her in, it was doubtful they would have even noticed his chief assistant’s harried state. Her blonde hair, usually kept down as was the woman’s preference, was in a rushed tail behind her head, and the blouse under her tailored two-piece suit looked like it hadn’t been pressed before getting pulled on. Her nail polish was slightly chipped, her black heels dirty, and the silver flowers of her necklace hadn’t been matched to the plainer studs in her ears. To almost anyone else, these things wouldn’t have earned so much as a second glance. The chief assistant to the executive officer of the prestigious Galens Institute was an *exceedingly* busy position, after all. The individual holding that title could therefore be forgiven the minute details of fashion.

But too Rama, comparing Maddison’s ‘state’ to her usually clean-cut presence only affirmed how troublesome the last day had been.

“Have you gone home yet?” he asked her, squinting less at the woman as his vision cleared.

She shrugged in answer, tucking the smaller tablet she’d just accepted from him under the larger pad she already held in the crook of her other arm. “Once quickly this morning. Just to grab a change of clothes.” She looked down at herself in concern. “Do I look that bad?”

“No,” Rama assured her with a quick shake of his head. Then he motioned down at the same shirt and sweat pants he’d been wearing since being jolted out of bed the previous evening. “And even if you did, it’s not like I’d be one to judge.”

Maddison only nodded, grimacing.

Then she did her job.

“The notice. From the Kamiya Corporation. How do you want to handle it?”

Rama repressed a groan, placing his hands on the desk and pushing himself back into his chair.

“*Three*,” he grumbled. “They’re bringing *three* here, to the school.”

“It’s their right.” Maddison shrugged. “ISCM regulations allow sponsors to impose on academic institutes.”

“I’m aware, Maddison, thank you,” Rama grunted back, looking up at the vaulted ceiling of his office. “And they’re hardly ‘imposing’. They’re hosting them in the city, and covering all food and transportation costs. All they’re asking for is scheduled access to private training facilities, and our simulation protocols.”

“SB6 has availability right now. Especially during the times I think they would be asking for said access. It would provide everything they need.” Maddison was using a stylus to scroll over something on her own pad as she answered. “As for simulation protocols, that’s easy enough. We just provide the same access the third-years sponsored trainers get.”

“Yes, I’m *aware*,” Rama repeated impatiently.

Maddison looked up at him innocently.

“Then what could possibly be the problem?”

Rama brought his gaze down to glower at this chief assistant, trying to instill every ounce of menace he could into that stare.

Maddison waved his irritation away like a pesky fly.

“Rama, I am *way* too tired to feel threatened by your *equally*-exhausted attempt to get me to keep my mouth in check, so let’s just cut to the chase.” She pointed the stylus at him. “You’re worried.”

He continued stare at her for a second.

Then he gave up with a snort.

“Of *course*, I’m worried,” he grumbled. “How can I *not* be? I *told* Ward to be careful with that situation, and all it took was one good shove from Central to have him running *headlong* into it.”

Maddison frowned at him. “You think Abel knew about the offer?”

“There’s no way she couldn’t have. I’ve been keeping an ear out myself, since that woman showed up here.” He repressed a shiver as he thought of Ueno Jasper. “She just... gave me the impression she wasn’t one to give up easily.”

Maddison looked suddenly interested. “You didn’t tell me that. And?”

“And let’s just say Kamiya has been making big enough waves in the corporate spaces that I would be surprised if there’s a white-collar prisoner on *Pluto* who doesn’t know about their interest in Rei by now.”

His chief assistant’s expression was abruptly as concerned as he felt.

“So now you add in these ‘extra’ conditions he apparently negotiated for—” Rama waved at the pad in Maddison’s arm that had displayed Kamiya’s notice and request “—and yeah. You could say I’m a little worried.”

The woman nodded slowly, seeming to contemplate this train of thought while she chewed on her lip.

“... And there’s nothing we can do about it?” she asked after a moment.

“Not now. Not anymore.” Rama shook his head. Then he frowned. “I was planning to pull some strings. There’s a few favors the Institute could have called in, a few doors we could have knocked on. I was going to get them everything we could...”

Maddison peered at him curiously.

“... But?” she asked after a second. “You sound like there’s a ‘but’...”

Rama didn’t immediately answer her.

He didn’t want to voice the *‘But I don’t know if it would have been enough’* that whispered in his ear.

“But now it’s out of our hands,” he told her instead, sitting up straight and forcing himself to shed the concerns of an uncle and assume the mantel of commanding officer once more. “Maddison, can you see to the arrangements Kamiya is requesting. Give them what they want. I’ll approve access to SB6 as needed so long as it doesn’t conflict with Institute business.”

“Understood,” Maddison, too, had slipped back into her role in answer. “Should we notify Firesong?”

“Not yet.” Rama ground his teeth at that. “Specific request from the head trainer. Apparently she already has some ideas.”

Maddison did a better job of hiding her opinion of this statement than he had, whatever it might be. Instead, she just made a note on her pad. “Okay. Anything else?”

“No. That’ll be all. Once you’re done with that, go home. And sleep in tomorrow. I’ll see you at... let’s say 1000.”

It was a testament to just how tired Maddison was that she didn’t make any protest, but instead only nodded gratefully.

“Understood,” she said again as she turned and started for the door. “Then I’ll take care of this and head out. Good night, Colonel.”

“Good night,” he grunted, already reaching out to activate the display controls on his desk, thinking to take a crack at some of his own piled-up work before calling it an evening.

His head was inches from the wood when he stopped, struck by a thought.

“Actually, Maddison, make a note,” he told her just as the woman opened the office door.

“Yes, sir?” she asked, propping the door open with a heel and bringing the stylus to her pad one last time.

“Carmen. Salista too. The other guardians we’ll let Firesong inform, should they so choose. But Carmen and Salista...” Rama frowned, hand still outstretched but forgotten. “They’ll want to know. Carmen especially, all things considered. And... and I don’t think Aria is going to tell them...”

CHAPTER 10

PLACEHOLDER

-PLACHOLDER

Aria didn’t speak to Rei for the remainder of the evening. She ignored his messages, ignored his two attempts to call her, and the fact that she let the group know she was heading

to the training center early to ‘book a room’—something that could be done from anywhere via the school feeds—made it pretty clear she’d been serious about wanting to be left alone. Sure enough, even during their 2 hours of training she deftly dodged partnering with him so much as a single time, announcing as she called out initial pairings how Catcher, Chancery, and Logan should probably spend a bit more time fighting a Phalanx than they had for the last couple months. The only time she addressed him in any way all night, in fact, was when she let all of them know she’d gotten confirmation from Maddison Kent that the school had assigned them a chaperone for the following afternoon, and that they should all be dressed and ready to head into the city by 1300.

That, if possible, had brought Firesong’s mood down only further.

Aria’s silence, to Rei’s great chagrin, held through Sunday morning, including the dawn training hours she called for them to do in order to make up for Saturday’s missed time. Actually, after Rei was a little over the astonishment that was his girlfriend avoiding him, he realized that Catcher and Logan, too, were quieter than usual, the former apparently in solidarity with Aria, the latter in a constant state of near-silent contemplation, his expression going back and forth from distraught to annoyed to frustrated every time Rei looked at him. In the two boy’s case it worked out probably for the better, because Catcher seemed to recall overnight that he wasn’t speaking to the Mauler, and Logan didn’t even notice.

On the other hand, the only person who was *anything* but quiet was Chancery, for once.

Practically from the moment they’d left that back corner of the lobby to the time they were heading to lunch the following day, the Lancer had barely left him alone. It wasn’t a bad thing—Rei was feeling a little too ostracized to turn down company of any form—but it *was* a little overwhelming. Like a switch had gone off in her head, Chancery pelted him almost non-stop with questions about Kamiya, about Firesong’s new situation, even about Shido and the attention he was getting. She wanted to know the details of the sponsorship, about the training they were being promised, the terms and conditions, the timeline, everything. She wanted to know more about the situation with Central wanting Rei and Aria in the Sol System by the end of the year, and what was expected of the pair of them—as well as Firesong as a squad—in order to make sure that didn’t happen. She was pleased when Rei simply handed

over the Kamiya contract for review, but surprisingly she didn't seem all that miffed when he could only provide her with minimally more information on the transfer orders than he already had.

"So we have to win..." she kept repeating, sometimes to him, sometimes just to herself. "All of it."

Rei could only ever confirm this, but even when this devolved into nothing more than the tenth nod in an hour, Chancery only seemed to grow more excited.

They ate lunch in the same silence they'd had breakfast, with only the Lancer doing more than politely asking someone to pass the salt as she muttering to herself about potential and what might be coming out of the coming months for them. Even she quieted down, though, when Aria stood up at 1245 and—careful to look at everyone but Rei—told them it was time to get going. As one they got to their feet and handed their trays off to a passing service bot, then left the mess hall to head for the south gate that was the only entrance to the school always kept open to the comings and goings of visitors, staff, and students. In a continued mockery of the miserable tempest that had been the last two days, the day was sunny and bright, and would have been warm were it not for the crisp breeze that teased their exposed faces and hair, bringing with it the cold smells of ice and winter trees. It was Rei's favorite kind of weather, personally, and yet he couldn't bring himself to so much as tilt his head back to peer at the clear blue sky before they reached the gate.

With Aria not speaking to him and everyone else tucked away in the quiet parts of their own heads, he was having a hard time keeping at bay the shadows that had been piling up across his thoughts for the last few weeks, a fact that wasn't helped by their intended destination.

The stone walls that surrounded the Institute in a perfect, massive square served a decent distraction, at the very least. Though he saw them every day—and had passed through them a handful of times now—the sheer *mass* of the campus' defenses was always something worth gaping at. Well over a hundred feet tall and made of solid stone, the walls gave off the impression of some great castle perimeter, complete with crenelations and ivy that had overgrown the least-curated sections of the campus. The gate, too, was awesome to behold, a

massive gap in the line flanked by matching banners that extended from the top of the stone nearly to the bottom, upon which the seven stars and crossed swords of the ISCM was embroidered in gold on black above the red griffin on white of the school itself. Two huge slots were cut out of the inside of the wall, from which the teeth of a steel ‘door’ that had to have been over 90 feet tall and 5 feet thick protruded from one side, ready to slide across the opening to slot into the other, sealing off the school. It made no difference that the defenses were functionally useless in an age of flying transports, hole drives, and Users who—at a high enough rank—could have leapt clear over them and land on the other side without so much as dirtying their boots.

It was the impact of their presence that mattered, and Rei couldn’t help but remember—as he almost always did when crossing the great threshold of the Institute—his first time taking in the gate and the campus beyond, standing just outside the wall with Viv as they’d been waved in.

Viv...

Frowning, Rei pulled his eyes down from the carved heights as the five of them made their way out of the campus, looking beyond to the large half-circle of patterned cobblestone that formed the south gate’s grand landing zone. Cut into the heavy swath of trees that encircled Galens on all sides like a buffer between it and Castalon proper, there were several flyers waiting along the edge of the pad, some attended to by Institute staff helping visitors in or out, some sitting idle and empty as they undoubtedly waited for their riders to return. Scanning them all, Rei caught sight of their own transport at the same time Catcher did, and he had to admit surprise on seeing their chaperone.

“Over there.” The Saber pointed towards a larger flyer along the east edge of the pad. “And... Huh... Is that Gross?”

Aria only grunted an agreement before heading that way.

As they approached, Rei couldn’t help but think Sergeant Major Liam Gross didn’t look much himself, standing at ease as he waited beside the flyer. Setting aside the fact that the Duelist sub-instructor was dressed in black-and-golds—a rare sight as it was for the first years who only saw him during combat training—the man looked... drawn. His tanned skin was

paler than usual, and his blondish hair—usually kept tidy and neat in a short tail at the back of his head—looked unkempt. His blue eyes had dark bags under them, but most alarmingly—at least for Rei—was the fact that the sergeant major took all of them in without so much as pausing on him, even if just to glare briefly. He hadn't caught the sub-instructor's attention during cross-training the previous day, but if he had Rei knew he'd have bet every credit he owned that Gross would have at least frowned at him. Though he'd come a long way from the stony indifference he'd shown in the first weeks of class the previous semester, ever since Dyrk Reese's dismissal the man had been left as the very last of their teachers who still didn't seem at least unbothered by his presence in class.

And yet now there wasn't so much as a blink of annoyance...

Rei had to work not to clench his jaw, swearing for the hundredth time that he would brain Viv when she woke up for not understanding just how *stupid* she'd been.

Even if she *did* end up punching him right back for much the same reason...

"All of you here?" Gross' voice, at least, still held the firm clip of an ISCM officer despite his bedraggled look. "Good. Get in. UTU visiting hours are typically restricted, but Altmore has given us special permission, given the circumstances. Let's not keep them waiting."

With nothing more than a salute from all five of them, they piled in.

The flight through Castalon was a somber journey. At least at breakfast and lunch there'd been the sounds of forks and knives and Chancery talking under her breath. Now the Lancer was as solemn as any of them, staring out her window absently while the sunlit glass of the skyscrapers flew by. It didn't help that Gross, too, never said a word, which was particularly awkward for Rei because the man had taken the empty seat beside his before taking off. The trip was smooth, the flyer barely jostling in the occasional crosswinds that coursed through the high rises, and without anyone speaking so much as a word they soon touched down on the Altmore landing pad.

Rei's misery was so acute as he stepped out of the transport that he almost leapt for joy when he saw even a minimally familiar face and green scrubs jogging towards them.

"Sergeant Major Gross?" Josh Alberty asked as he came to a stop before them. Gross only nodded as Logan ducked out of the flyer last, closing the door behind them all. "Great.

If you'll follow me, I'll lead you to the UTU." The nurse didn't immediately turn around though, pausing instead to eye Rei and Aria. "How you two doing?" he asked gently.

Rei glanced sidelong, and found the hint of anger that had been consistently lingering in his girlfriend's face since the previous night had finally gone, replaced with what looked like a poorly masked mix of anxiety and sadness.

"Fine, sir," she got out in a strong voice despite not meeting Alberty's eyes. "Has there... Is she any better?"

Alberty was watching her kindly, offering a half smile even though Aria wasn't looking at him. "Cadet Arada hasn't shown any significant changes yet, but we're seeing that as a good thing."

"A... A good thing?" Logan, on the other hand, sounded like he was working hard to keep his voice steady.

Alberty nodded to him. "Yes. She was in rough shape when she arrived. The fact that she hasn't slipped further away is a very good sign." He looked from Logan to Chancery, then to Gross. "I'm assuming this is the rest of her squad?"

"It is," the sergeant major answered brusquely, and Rei couldn't help but think the man, too, was having to put effort into his composure.

"Got it," Alberty seemed to take the group's energy in stride—probably a valuable skill, in his line of work—and finally turned to start back towards the row of doors that led into Altmore. "Then if you'll all follow me."

Rei let his mind wander this time as they made their way through the hospital, not even bothering to try to track the twists and turns and ups and downs. There were more people in the halls now, with hundreds on hundreds of staff and patients alike passing them while they moved, the former rushing by as often as they could be seen discussing care and charts pulled up on tablets with their fellows, the latter in various states of mobility and injury. It was interesting, taking in the rooms they walked by now, and Rei even had time to study several anti-grav chairs that seemed to be updated from the last few times he recalled needing to use a similar unit himself, after his more intensive leg surgeries. It made his skin crawl a little, thinking about those days, but once again everything and anything was a welcome distraction.

Almost too soon, therefore, they reached the UTU, and Catcher at last managed a low “Damn...” at the sight of the heavy doors when Alberty led them through the biometric lock.

Viv’s room was once more the only one showing any activity, though in the daytime the overhead strip lights seemed brighter, and several nurses and one doctor in a white coat over his own green scrubs manned the circular station in the center of the space. All of them looked up when their group entered, and Rei didn’t miss the brief stares that lingered on him and Aria in particular, nor the exchanged glances and raised eyebrows. Clearly this was a group indeed used to working with Users, however, because they’d all returned to their tasks before Alberty finished leading the way around the work area to the bright wall of Viv’s unit.

“Oh... Woah...”

It was Chancery’s turn to mutter when they reached it, words brimming with grim awe. She’d stepped forward at once to peer through, both hands coming up to rest fingertips against the transparent smart-glass, standing so close her breath fogged the wall.

She wasn’t the only one.

Apparently thinking along the same lines, Rei and Aria held back, letting Catcher and Liam Gross move forward to take in the room, the Saber with mouth hanging open, the sergeant major tight-lipped and frowning. Inside, the scene was largely unchanged. Viv was alone now, but still covered by the hospital gown with those dozens of lines and tubes attached to her, all drifting lazily within the confines of the anti-grav tank she was suspended in. Her hair was swimming around her head, and most of her face was still hidden by the DTRU, whose pulsing green light was only one of so many blinking alongside the other countless screens across the twenty different units and machines set around the room.

At least someone washed her face... Rei thought miserably, noticing the blood residue had been cleaned from her nose and mouth.

Not that that made it any easier to take in her sorry state.

“Hell, Viv...” Catcher muttered into the wall. “What were you *thinking*...?”

Rei doubted the question had been meant for anyone but the ether, and no one answered.

“Hey kid... You okay?”

It was Alberty who spoke, and at the concern in his voice everyone turned away from the wall. Immediately, it was apparent what had drawn the nurse's attention.

If he'd been pale before, Rei thought Logan looked almost ghostly as the Mauler took in his girlfriend through the glass.

He hadn't stepped forward with the others, hadn't made a move to approach. Instead, he stood stiff two or three steps back, like he was afraid of getting any closer. His eyes, those black pools tinged with that keen red, were transfixed on Viv's form, and he had a hand clutching at the cloth of his uniform over his heart. He was so still that Rei suspected he'd forgotten how to breathe.

"Logan..."

It was Aria who brought the boy out of his shell again, moving back to put a hand on his arm. At her touch he started and blinked, taking in a gulp of air that sounded much needed.

He never looked away from Viv, though.

"I... I'm fine," he said unsteadily, though whether this was in answer to Alberty's question or Aria's hand on his forearm, Rei didn't know.

"You sure...?" the nurse asked, taking Logan in with continued concern. "It's okay if you're not. People react differently to seeing friends and family hurt, kid. It's understandable."

"I'm fine," Logan repeated, a little more firmly this time. His hand dropped from his chest, and he was able to look away from Viv to give Aria a little nod of thanks. He continued to address Alberty, though. "Can we go in?"

"A couple at a time, if you want," the man answered, still eyeing Logan worriedly. "Not more than that though, please. She's stable, and it might be good for her to have some friendly voices around for a bit, but we don't want to overtax her mental functions right now."

"She can hear us?" Chancery asked, having returned to watching Viv's drifting form through the wall.

Alberty considered, finally looking back around into the room, too.

"It's... unlikely. But not impossible. But even if she doesn't right now, some people come out of these things remembering everything that happened around them while they were under. You never know."

Together they all nodded at that. For a moment no one spoke, everyone waiting for someone else to volunteer.

“Logan, you go,” Aria said quietly after a few seconds. “Take your time.”

Despite the tightness of his face, Logan nodded and took a couple unsteady steps towards the door. Alberty opened it for him, and the Mauler was halfway into the room when he paused.

Looking around, his eyes fell on Rei.

“Rei. You, too.” His voice was hoarse. “She’d want to know you were here.”

Then he stepped fully inside before Rei could protest.

Rei didn’t move, though, uncertain. He *wanted* to follow Logan, sure, but he also wanted to give the guy the opportunity to stand with Viv on his own if he w—

“Go.”

Aria’s voice was gentle, as was the hand on his lower back, pushing him forward. He took a forced step towards the door and looked around, surprised. She wasn’t looking at him, her eyes on Viv through the wall, but that earlier anger was still absent from her face and her crossed arms seemed more now like an attempt to hold herself than any indication of ire.

He felt bad as the knot of anxiety—omnipresent since dinner the previous night—loosened a little in his stomach, and he followed Logan into the room.

Inside, the whirl of the anti-grav engine in the floor and beeping of the medical units made for a low, constant thrum as Rei approached the tank. It was open at the top, a rolling cap slid off along the back of the machine for access, letting the two of them look down on Viv unobstructed. Logan was already standing on the far side of the tank, one hand resting on its edge, and so Rei moved opposite him, watching the slow rise and fall of Viv’s chest under her gown that set her whole body shifting gently up and down within the suspension field. For a time they just stood like that, neither having anything to say, both struggling with the weight of their own hurt, taking her in.

“Can we touch her?” Logan asked after a minute to two, looking to the still-open door where Alberty was standing just inside the room.

“Yes,” the nurse answered. “Just be careful, please.”

Logan nodded, turning back to study Viv with sunken eyes.

Then, hesitantly, he reached out and took her left hand up in both of his.

The Mauler drew in a slow, shaky breath as his fingers touched hers, the sound something like a mix of surprise and relief.

“She’s warm,” he murmured, more to himself than anyone else.

Which didn’t keep Rei from his own blunt jolt of joy as he, too, reached out to take Viv’s other hand.

She felt like life. He wasn’t sure why that was surprising to him—much less why it brought with it such a sense of ease—but he was still grateful for the heat of his best friend’s skin against his. He thought he could even feel the low beat of a pulse in the tips of her fingers, and the impression of Viv as cold body faded. She was alive.

Which meant—knowing her—that she was fighting.

“I’m *seriously* going to kill her when she wakes up,” he muttered.

Across from him, Logan gave a low chuckle. “Good luck getting to her before me.”

“She’s so good at calling all of *us* morons. Pretty sure we’re gonna be free of that for a while.”

“You think so?” Logan snorted. “I give it a week before she starts trying to gaslight us into thinking this never happened. Otherwise how is she ever gonna be able to make fun of us?”

“*So* true.” Rei grinned down at what he could make out of Viv’s face. “That’s fine. Just another reason for me to kick her ass.”

Logan nodded, but didn’t answer. For another minute after that they just stood there, watching the pulse of the DTRU, Rei squeezing one hand gently, the Mauler rubbing her other palm with both thumbs.

“... Is it weird that I miss her...?”

Rei looked up at the question, brow furrowing.

“Weird? How?”

Logan offered him half a shrug, not looking away from his girlfriend. “I don’t know... It’s only been a couple days, *and* she’s right here. But still...”

“You miss her,” Rei finished for him, nodding and letting his gaze fall back to Viv. He considered for a moment, thinking about the last 48 hours. About everything that had happened. About Kamiya, Central, Catcher not speaking to Logan, Aria not speaking to *him*. He thought about the quiet weight that hung over the squad like a chain veil, and how even the sunlit day had felt like some divine mockery.

And he thought about how he was starting to lose track of the times he caught a hint of Viv’s absence all around him.

“You know what, man...” Rei muttered. “I don’t think I realized it till just now, but... Yeah... I miss her, too. Even *if* she’s an insufferable flagpole with better hair than common sense sometimes.”

Logan laughed at that. It was a short, sharp thing, but it was real. A real, true laugh.

And, like the warmth of Viv’s hand in his, it made Rei feel a little bit better.

They stayed with her a few more minutes, then took their leave so Catcher and Chancery could have some time to stand with her. A bit later, Aria went in, and Rei was pleasantly surprised when Liam Gross joined her. While she stood to the side with Viv’s hand in both of hers like Logan had, the instructor lingered at the foot of the tank with his arms loose at his sides, gazing down at his student with what Rei thought might have been tense frustration. After a minute or so the man took his leave without a word, but when he exited the room he didn’t rejoin them, instead striding right passed the rest of Firesong to the nurse’s station, where he appeared to inquire further about Viv’s condition.

That was when, alone with her, Aria started to cry.

The tears came silently, running down her face one at a time until she reached up with the sleeve of one arm to wipe at her cheeks. Her gaze never left Viv’s face, but Aria sniffed as she squeezed her hand tighter, like she didn’t want to let go.

It ended up being more than Rei could bear.

“Is there a bathroom nearby?” he asked Alberty, relieved when his voice didn’t crack.

“Sure,” the nurse gestured towards the front of the UTU. “On your left near the doors.”

Not trusting himself to open his mouth again as his cheeks began to ache, Rei nodded in thanks before turning away and doing his best not to look rushed while he made for the

entrance. Reaching them, he found a plain, narrow side hall he hadn't noticed before, ending at a pair of doors marked as restrooms.

Slipping inside the closest of the two, Rei locked the door and put his back to it, leaning his head against the polished steel as he took several deep breaths.

Then he let his own tears fall.

Like Aria, he didn't make a sound as he cried, though he did silently curse Logan for bringing on the cruel realization of how much he was missing Viv and her sharp presence, even if she was barely 50 feet from where he stood. It hurt. It just hurt. Seeing her like that. Feeling like it was at least partially his fault, as much as anyone—including himself—could say otherwise. She'd nearly *died*, and he was seeing and feeling her absence more and more. He realized suddenly, standing there and lifting an arm to cover his face as the tears continued, that he couldn't remember the last time he and Viv had been separated for more than a day. No, actually he could. When he'd been brigged the previous semester, which had barely counted given she'd been the one passing him most of their school assignments and the like. But before that, it had been over a year ago when she'd gone with her family on their yearly trip to the resorts of Venus. A trip she'd skipped for the first time last summer so she could train and prep for Galens with Rei.

Over a year... Rei thought with measured astonishment, understanding why it suddenly hurt so much.

Giving in, he let out a choked, low sob, and let himself slide down to sit on the floor, back still to the door, legs tucked to his chest and head against his knees.

Rei wasn't sure how long he stayed like that, not bothering to care. He let himself go, let himself release all the building feelings that had been mounting throughout the day as wet patches in the black of his pant legs. He stayed quiet, but everything crashed down all at once, washing over and away. It felt at once immensely relieving and horribly miserable, though he suspected the former would outweigh the latter eventually.

He only realized it had probably been at least 10 minutes or so when a soft knock beat quietly through the door.

“Shit,” Rei cursed under his breath, hurrying to his feet. Directly in front of him a sink stood under a wide mirror by the toilet, and he allowed himself a quick glance and a hard rub of his face with both hands in an attempt not to look so totally downtrodden.

“Sorry,” he said in as bright a tone as he could manage, unlatching the door and pulling it open quickly. “Just needed to clear my—”

But then he stopped short, taken aback to find Aria waiting for him, her green eyes still red, but edged with concern.

He didn’t know why, but he’d actually assumed it had been Logan who’d come looking for him, or maybe Chancery or even Gross. He wasn’t displeased, but he was definitely surprised, especially when his girlfriend took his face in cautiously.

“... You okay?” she asked gently after a second.

Rei had to work hard not to show how much that question—posed directly to him while she looked him in the eye—made his heart leap.

“Yeah,” he answered as best he could, finishing his step out of the bathroom and letting the door close behind him with a click. “Just... harder than I thought, seeing her. Didn’t expect it to hit me like that given we were here the other night.”

“Yeah... me, too...” Aria nodded, and didn’t look away from him. “After Gross left me alone with her I just... I kinda broke down a little...”

“I saw... Think that’s what got me going.” Rei studied her back. “... Are *you* okay?”

Aria snorted, crossing her arms over her chest.

“Hell no,” she mumbled. “Feels like the sky is falling...”

“Yeah...” was all Rei could manage at that.

The silence hung between them for several seconds, and he let it. For one thing he wasn’t really sure what to say, but for another Aria had been the one to seek *him* out, hadn’t she?

Did that mean...?

“Gross asked me to check on you,” she said suddenly, her gaze finally dropping from his, fixing instead on some button or the like on the front of his uniform. “You were gone a while.”

“Oh.” Rei felt his insides collapse in on themselves. “Okay. Thanks. I’ll head back now.”

Aria, though, didn't move. She stood with eyes still averted, and the hallway was too narrow to get around her easily.

"Should we head b—?" Rei started to ask at the exact same time she began to speak.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have—"

They both stopped again, blinking at each other, pausing in tandem to let the other finish.

Rei had *no* desire to navigate that particularly awkward dance, though.

"You go," he told her quickly.

Aria hesitated, cheeks a little flushed with more than being the rubbing away for drying tears now.

"I'm sorry," she repeated quietly. "I shouldn't have gotten as mad as I did."

Rei felt that hollow in his gut refill a little.

"S'okay," he muttered. "Pretty sure you had pretty good reason."

Aria let out a dry laugh, but her arms tightened around her chest. "You think?" Her hair fell in front of her face as her gaze dropped fully to the floor. "I just... You always take everything on yourself, Rei... Since the start of the year, you *always* take everything on yourself..."

Rei didn't say anything, and after a second she continued.

"Having to keep Shido quiet. Dealing with Logan and Selleck and all them last semester. Type Shift. Sectionals. The Duel... It's always *you* who has to deal with this stuff..."

"I mean... not by choice..." Rei defended himself with a forced grin.

Rei thought he saw her bite her lip under her hair.

"Yeah... That's kinda my point..."

She took a breath, then lifted her face to look at him again. Her eyes were dry, but there was a different pain in her expression now even as she continued to cling to herself.

"It's pushed on you. It always seems to get pushed on *you*. So then why...?" She swallowed, and looked like she was having a hard time speaking. "Why would you go and *take* this on? Willingly *take* this on...?"

Rei didn't have to ask what 'this' meant.

"I'm sorry," it was his turn to say. "I should have talked to you about it."

“Yeah, you should have...” she grumbled dejectedly, and Rei managed a crack a real smile.

“I think I just kinda... didn’t want you to have to deal with it with me? Like... it was the answer. It *is* the answer, Aria. Catcher was right. Even if it’s some kind of trap, at least *this* part is legit. Something we can leverage now, while we need to.” He shrugged sadly. “And I guess I just... didn’t want you to have to take that on...”

He realized what he’d said even before Aria glared at him.

“Exactly,” she told him firmly. “*That* is my actual point, Rei... Would I have tried to talk you out of it? Definitely. Would I have succeeded? Probably not. Cause you’re right.” She seemed to sag slightly. “I’ve been thinking about it all day, and you *are* right. I think I have more faith in my uncle than you, but whatever Galens can offer us isn’t a guarantee. But *still*,” her gaze grew sharp again, “you *didn’t* have to do it alone. I’m your squad leader, I’m your teammate, and—” she took a small step towards him “—I’m your *girlfriend*. Or did you forget that?”

“No, ma’am” Rei assured her with a half-hearted salute. “Most definitely not, ma’am.”

“Good. Then tell me, Mr. Future-Evil-Ruler-of-the-Galaxy, *who* exactly is *supposed to help you take on this stuff* if not *me*?”

Rei had to shrink away as Aria’s eyes started to blaze again.

“I know,” he answered, taking a gamble and bringing one hand up to rest atop her crossed arms. “And I *am* sorry. But... can you blame me for *not* wanting to drag you into this crap? For not wanting to drag *any* of you into this? Would you have done anything differently?”

Aria didn’t stop glaring, but also didn’t answer.

“Exactly,” Rei pressed, squeezing her arm gently. “So just... don’t stay mad, okay? Not for too long? It’s... kinda killing me...”

She blinked, looking surprised at that. Then she took in his face more carefully, suddenly worried.

Whatever she saw there seemed to break something in her, because a second later she had her arms around his neck, hugging him tight to her.

“I’m sorry,” she said again, into his ear this time. “I’m really, *really* sorry.”

“S’okay,” he assured her once more, feeling his heart soar into his throat as he wrapped his own arms around her waist, hugging her back.

“I’m just... I think I’m scared, Rei. I think I’m *really* scared.”

Rei didn’t answer for a second, struggling with himself. For the first time in a while he thought he saw something moving in the shadows in the corner of the hall, something tall and grey and devoid of all emotion.

Then he felt Aria pull him just a little closer, and the fearful thought vanished.

“Yeah... me, too,” he finally got out, resting the side of his head against hers.

They weren’t like that for long before Aria reminded him that Gross was probably expecting them back, and so it was with some regret that Rei let her go. Then again it helped when she took his hand to walk down the hall, dropping it only as they turned the corner back into the central space of the UTU.

“There they are,” Chancery said from the other side of the nurse’s station, and Catcher—standing next to her—looked around with a worried frown.

“Sorry,” Rei forced himself to say, reaching them. “Just needed a quiet spot for a second.” Looking around, he saw that Liam Gross was by the wall again, talking to the doctor this time, and that Alberty had let Logan back into the room to stand with Viv on his own.

“He’s been in there for a bit,” Chancery answered the silent question as Rei’s eyes lingered on the Mauler. “Asked for a minute with her after Aria came out. I get the sense the nurse guy gets what’s going on there.”

“Yeah, he seems pretty sharp,” Rei answered absently, watching Logan running a thumb along Viv’s palm again.

Just as a lump started to form in his throat once more, he felt Aria’s comforting hand on his back, and he looked around to find her smiling sadly at him.

“She’ll be okay,” she said. “Gross said the doctor—” she indicated the man in the white coat the sergeant major was currently talking to “—told him the same thing Aberty did. They’re expecting her to start improving in the next day or two.”

Rei breathed a sigh of relief at that, nodding and looking back around towards Viv’s room. As he did, he caught Catcher eyeing him and Aria carefully.

“Does this mean you two are speaking again?” the Saber asked.

Rei and Aria exchanged a look.

“Guess so,” they said together, smiling a little at each other.

“Oh, thank the *MIND*.” Catcher put one hand on his hip and drew the other down across his face as though in exhaustion. “I am *not* built for the silent treatment. They should give me a medal.”

“No one told you you had to join in.” Chancery narrowed her eyes at him. “That was all you.”

“Yeeeah but there was a point to be made.” Catcher cocked his head at Rei. “Received?”

“Loud and clear,” Rei answered with a chuckle.

“Firesong, if you’ve all had the chance to sit with her, we’re going to head back.”

As one they looked around to find that Gross had wrapped up his conversation with the doctor, who’d returned to whatever duties he was needed for at the workstation. The sergeant major, for his part, was in the process of rapping a knuckle dully against the wall to Viv’s room.

“You too, Grant,” he called through the glass. “I get that you want to stay with her, but these people have jobs to do, and the longer we’re here the more likely we are to get in the way.”

Logan made no protest, though he did squeeze Viv’s hand one last time before replacing it gently back within the suspension field of the tank. Then he exited with a clenched jaw, allowing Alberty to finally step out and close the door again behind him.

“Everyone set?” Gross asked. When they all nodded, he returned the gesture. “Okay, then let’s get going.” He looked around at Alberty. “Could we bother you to guide us out? This place is a damn maze.”

The nurse chuckled, but otherwise only motioned for them to follow as he started for the UTU doors. Aria led the way after him, with Catcher and Chancery right behind her and Logan treading like a great, somber shadow on their heels. Rei would have joined, too, except he was in for his second surprise of the day when Gross brought him up short.

“Ward. Just a sec.”

Rei, taken aback, turned and—choosing to play it safe—saluted the man.

“Sir?”

Gross grimaced. “At ease, Cadet. I just wanted to see how you were doing?”

Rei’s mouth almost fell open at that.

“Uh... I’m alright, sir.”

“You sure about that? You looked half dead even before you stepped into this place.”

Gross frowned around at the UTU. “And I already know you and Arada are tight. Came in together from the same preparatory, that right?”

“It is, yes, sir.”

Gross nodded, his eyes returning to take Rei in carefully. Unsure of what else to say, Rei could only stand there waiting.

“She talks about you. Every chance she gets. You know what?”

Rei blinked.

“Viv?” he asked, surprised.

“*Cadet Arada*,” Gross corrected him, though more gently than he ever had before. “And yes. Not that I give my Duelists much time for chit-chat in class, but she finds the time, somehow.” He started to look over his shoulder, back towards Viv’s room, but seemed to stop himself halfway, eyes landing on a corner of the floor nearby instead. “She’s a good a student. A good soldier. I don’t like seeing her like this...”

“Yes, sir,” Rei answered with another hard swallow. He half-expected the man to continue along the lines of the ‘so what the hell are *you* doing hanging around her?’ line of questioning he still got on occasion, but—for some reason he couldn’t quite pinpoint—suspected that wouldn’t be the case this time.

Indeed, after a second Gross appeared to shake himself from whatever place his thoughts had taken him.

“If you’re good, then let’s get moving,” he said brusquely, starting by Rei in the direction of Alberty and the rest of the squad, who were just slipping out of the UTU’s opening doors.

“We can get you guys back in time to enjoy some of your afternoon, at least.”

Rei blurted the question out before he could stop himself.

“Sir... Uh... Are *you* okay?”

Gross practically froze, coming to a stop so abruptly Rei thought the sergeant major might have accidentally engaged his specs. For a second Rei was worried he'd overstepped, and he was already trying to cobble together a hurried apology when the man looked back.

This time, his gaze *did* fall on Viv again.

"Yeah..." Gross said slowly. "... I think I'm just realizing you guys *are* actually kids is all. Just... kids."

Viv felt Logan's hand leave hers, and she tried to call after him, to ask him not to go, to stay with her. Her voice, though, like everything else, was absent in the quiet ocean of warm, green light she'd found herself drifting along in, and even the fragile will to say his name disappeared fairly quickly.

She didn't know where she was, and hadn't since she started drifting in and out of the black into this brighter place. Then again, she'd found no particular reason to care until now. She was comfortable, lulled and serene in the endless, calming flow, the throbbing pains that had racked her body from some distance place having long since ebbed and subsided. She'd felt like she could have floated along forever in that place, at peace and at home.

And then, out of nowhere, there had been the glimpse of something white among the green, the shadow of a formless figure, and a wordless voice had knocked gently against her thoughts.

You have visitors, Cadet.

Viv had risen, then, had felt her being start to float up through the calming glow of the emerald depths. She hadn't gotten far, but her thoughts had cleared slightly, and like she was approaching some unseen surface still far above her she started to hear distant, dull sounds. Voices, she realized, too far to make out, and yet familiar...

That was when she started to climb herself.

She had no body to speak of. No arms to paddle with. No legs to kick. But despite that she'd felt herself rise further through the green, the light brightening with each passing

moment. The voices, too, became clearer, more distinct. The words were still lost to her, but soon she knew at least who was speaking.

Rei, Viv had realized, the first conscious thought she'd had since leaving the darkness. And... Logan? Logan!

She pushed harder to climb, then, pushed harder to force herself up and up towards the wash of what seemed like a brighter light above her. She managed it, but it was taking more to rise, now, more to press her being towards that unseen surface. She could *feel* them, feel their hands around her own, even though she didn't know where her hands *were*. She could make out words, too, could hear her name, could hear them speaking. She wanted to reach them, want to press up and up and up and up even as the green around her seemed to force her back.

Easy, Cadet. There's no need for that yet.

The ocean around Viv seemed to jolt, then hardened. It was still warm, still comfortable, but the drifting light had frozen, the lazy currents halted. Viv's climb, too, had ended, and even as she started to feel frustration and desperation build, she could move no further.

Easy, the voice repeated, feeling almost amused against her mind. It's not time. You have sleeping yet to do.

But Viv had ignored the words, the hint of humor sparking something like anger in some far off heart. She fought twice as hard, trying to claw her way forward, and the amusement left the world in a blink.

No.

The single word had quaked through everything. The light itself shivered, and the green morphed to red in a wash like erupting smoke all around her. The warmth became a dull heat, and with it came a strange, sharp threat, like something other than her lurked now in the dancing light.

Viv had stopped at once. She could still feel Rei and Logan somewhere above her, still hear their dim voices, but she ended her battle to reach them.

The voice didn't come again. Instead, after a time the red began to recede, and soon the world was all comfort and green once more. The current began again, and Viv allowed herself

simply to drift, desiring to ascend, but knowing the unseen presence would stop her again. It was odd. There was no fear in that empty knowledge.

Only certainty.

After a time she'd felt Logan and Rei depart. That was the first time she'd tried calling out to them, tried shouting their names, but her voice was as non-existent as anything else in that place. Others replaced them, and though they didn't speak Viv thought she recognized the touches of Catcher and Chancery, somehow. This was confirmed when a hand she knew to be Aria's took hers next, though she'd thought she'd felt another presence lingering nearby, unrecognized in its distance. Aria had cried at some point, Viv was sure, but she didn't understand why, couldn't understand what could be drawing such tears from her friend. After a while, Aria, too, had left, and with a welling of tempered sadness Viv felt herself start to sink again, felt her awareness begin to ebb as she fell back down into the depths.

At least until Logan took hold of her once again.

For a while she felt him there, felt his strong fingers around hers, felt his silent, stoic presence beside her body, wherever that body was. She tried a few more times to speak to no avail, and eventually settled into the comfortable drift, allowing herself simply to be anchored by his touch, drawing from it what she could while she had him. Only when he left again did she attempt to call out one final time, but her absent words rang soundlessly just as they had before.

And at last, the voice traced its words across her thoughts one last time.

You have even more fight in you than I thought, it said as Viv felt something firm and gentle start to pull her down, down away from the brightness. *That's good. Very good. You'll need. Someday very soon, I'm afraid.*

Viv barely registered the words, feeling her conscious starting to fade away as the green grew darker, the current even more calm and warm.

We'll talk soon, Cadet. Now... sleep.

And with that urging, Viv slipped back into the black, giving in to the weight and promise of the dark.

CHAPTER 11

Mid January, 2469

Astra System – Astra-3 – Low Orbit

PLACEHOLDER

-PLACHOLDER

WHAM-WHAM-WHAM-WHAM-WHAM-WHAM-WHAM!

Carmen Laurent’s twin blades struck the projected surface of the massive marble block before him in a blurring array of gattling blows. More than a hundred times in less than 10 seconds he struck at the stone, sheering into it with all the efficiency of an industrial asteroid drill, rubble and debris raining against his reactive shielding in a thousand tiny ripples all across the front of his body. Eventually he had to take a step forward as he carved a scarred hole into the marble, then a second, then a third.

Only when he had to step *inside* the stone—the shattered inner surface of the tunnel he was steadily forming for himself eerily illuminated by the glow of Catastrus’ red-orange vysetrium—did he stop.

“Reset!” he called aloud as he exited the hole back into the plainer interior of the Laurent estate’s private training chamber. Turning around again, he found the block—all 8000 cubic feet of it—returned to its original pristine shape. Looking up at the top right corner, Carmen focused on the “S0” that hovered in his frame there over the stone, displayed in large, black letters. “Up Defense spec to S1.”

There was a brief buzz in the characters, and the value changed accordingly.

“I can’t believe you’re *still* using verbal commands. Your children would be laughing at you right now, if they heard that.”

Carmen allowed himself a small smile as he looked over his shoulder towards the entrance of the training chamber, unsurprised to find his wife seated by the door, back against the room’s steel wall.

“Sorry. Did I wake you?”

Salista Laurent shook her head, but had to cover her mouth to help stifle a yawn even as she did so. Her attire didn't help convince him either, as she looked to have done nothing more than pulled a robe over the shirt and underwear she'd slept in, with even her feet bare.

And yet despite that, despite the new lines around her eyes since he'd last seen her, despite the months that had gone by with little more than a few video calls a week to keep them in each others minds, she was still the most beautiful creature Carmen had ever seen.

The fact that she always found a way to be near him for every moment of the few days he stole away each year to return home only endeared him further.

“My children can laugh all they want,” he continued, turning back to size up the marble again, rolling his wrists to loosen Catastrus' twin blades in his grip. “It's comforting. I grew up having to shout out orders whenever you wanted a field to do something, or use the old terminals. Still not used to the ocular commands these newer NOEDs have the capacity for.”

“Newer NOEDs’,” Salista repeated with a snigger from her spot by the door. “Carmen, it's been the standard for *twenty* years now.”

“Ah, the good old days,” Carmen sighed with mock wistfulness, smirking at the stone.

Then he struck out in a flash, cutting a gash a foot deep and six wide across the projection's handsome surface, which was immediately crossed by a dozen more just like it.

A minute or so later, he stepped out of his hand-carved tunnel once again.

“Reset!” he called out, wiping at his damp brow with the back of one bare hand. Given he had no plans to train more than his Offensive ability that morning, he'd only called on his Device's swords. His full CAD would certainly have helped monitor his core and environmental temperatures both, but there was always something rewarding about building up a sweat.

Maybe that's old fashioned, too, though, he thought to himself with a low laugh as he shouted for the Defense spec to be upped again.

Salista stole all the amusement away with a single quiet question.

“You... haven't heard from Amina or Kalus recently, have you...?”

Carmen stopped mid turn, about to set himself to the challenge of the S2 marble.

“... No,” he answered gently, not looking around at his wife. “But I know Amina’s doing well. I still have eyes on her, just in case.”

In the corner of his vision, he saw Salista nod.

“Kalus looked good too, when I saw him at Aria’s Sectionals.” She smiled dryly. “Not *happy*, but... good.”

“Have you spoken to him since Ganus?” he asked, even if he was sure he already knew the answer.

“No,” she answered with a shake of her head. “I messaged his old ID code once. Just to let him know I heard Aria made it back to the Institute without any other problem. He never responded, if he ever got it.” She went quiet for a few seconds. “Are we still sure we did the right thing, Carmen? *Truly?*”

Carmen took in a slow, deep breath, steeling himself in that unpleasant way he had to every morning when he took the commander’s chair. It was a hardening that cost him something, every time he did it.

And it was a price he was happy to pay.

“Yes,” he answered her firmly, making himself look around, now. “Even if I don’t like it. They *have* to be self-reliant, Salista. For their own sake.”

“I know,” his wife answered sadly, her own eyes on the floor under her bare feet, one hand picking absently at a hem of her robe. “I just... I wanted them to be able to rely on *each other*, at the very least. And... I think we failed at that...”

“They still talk,” Carmen pointed out, waving one blade so that the silver and green steel shone in the training room lights. “You said yourself Kalus told you Aria reached out to him about something.”

Salista shrugged, clearly unconvinced.

Forcing Carmen to say the hard part out loud.

“Even if they don’t... It may be for the best, Salista... We’ve talked about this before...”

No answer, this time, and the absent plucking of the hem stopped.

“They need to be ready,” Carmen pressed gently, forcing himself not to tighten his grip around his blades. “To be alone. They *all* need to be ready for it. What’s coming... Salista... They need to be ready to be the only ones left...”

“And you still won’t tell me what *is* coming...?”

Carmen barely heard the question, asked in the direction of the door as Salista turned away from him, her fingers tight around the cloth of her robes now.

“You know I can’t,” he answered steadily. “I’ve—”

“Told me too much as is’, yes,” she finished for him with a sigh, still not looking his way again. “I’ve heard that line so often I’m surprised we haven’t made it the family motto...”

Carmen chuckled darkly at that. Deciding it was time to take a break, he recalled Catastrus with a thought, the blades vanishing back into the bands around his wrists before he’d finished taking the first step towards his wife. Reaching her, he put his own back to the wall and slid down with a grunt of relief.

“... You sound old,” Sallista told him after a second, eyes still on the door.

“I *feel* old,” he grumbled in answer.

He thought better of admitting how his elbow—which was mostly titanium and synthetic muscle under the spidering scar that wasn’t even the largest of the dozens that decorated his body—had been bothering him more and more in the last year or so.

After a second—and still without looking at him—Salista leaned over and rested her weight against his, arm to arm, head coming around to settle against his shoulder with comfortable ease.

For a minute or so they sat like that, content in their silence, alone in the training room. Carmen reflected with an ounce of amusement how the orbital estate—even geo-locked to Astra-3 for convenience—was hurtling through space at thousands of miles an hour, and yet the stillness of these moments, the ease of his home, was what he missed most when he started to pine for it from Sirius. In another life Carmen thought he would have taken an early retirement some time ago, happy to return and *stay* with Salista. He probably would have had Amina, Kalus, and Aria there too, coming and going to visit their parents as the two of them aged together while time marched steadily by.

It was a dream far gone from the reality that was his and Salista's quiet preparation of their children for a world in which they were all alone...

A memory slipped into Carmen's thoughts, a screen depicting an ugly, empty blotch of black in which a single orb of even deeper darkness drifted, visibly only as a shadow among distant stars. He forced it away with some effort, willing himself not to tense at the thought and cause Salista further concern. Instead, he reached around and gave her arm a comforting squeeze before pressing her gently away so he could start to get to his feet.

"I only have a few more rounds before I'm done," he said. "Let me finish up and shower, and we can have breakfast."

His wife's gaze was still elsewhere, but she at least must have heard him because she nodded slowly. Repressing a sigh, Carmen returned to his starting spot in front of the marble, calling on his CAD once more.

The S2 stone posed significantly more of a challenge to him than his four previous rounds, and he ended up ripping through it twice more before shouting for the Defense spec to be boosted to S3. This time it took a solid 3 minutes of constant swinging to rip deep into the block, and Carmen's arms and shoulders were burning by the time he was fully within the stone. Another round there, then another, and he was heaving in heavy breaths as sweat drenched him, soaking through the black fabric of his combat suit until even the gold stitching of the swords and stars of the ISCM on his chest darkened with it.

Straightening, Carmen looked around at the makeshift tunnel of broken rock, frowning at a few uneven gashes where his technique had slipped as exhaustion set in. He was in the middle of contemplating if Salista would be willing to wait through one more crack at the S3, when a notification pinged his NOED.

One eyebrow raised as he saw who it was from, and he decided he'd pushed himself enough for that morning.

"All done?" Salista asked him, pushing herself to her feet as he came out of the block with Corpus recalled once again.

“In a second,” he muttered in answer, reading through the woman’s message with interest even as he approached the door. Getting past the civil formalities, he reached what he suspected was the meat of the missive and stopped. “*Well* now...”

“What is it?” Salista asked, frowning through the message at him.

“A notification. From Maddison Kent.”

“Oh.” His wife’s expression, so usually composed in the presence of anyone other than Carmen, hardened visibly.

“Ease up. Just because Rama doesn’t let you meddle doesn’t mean you have to sour on him.” Carmen couldn’t help the hint of a smirk that formed on his lips as he kept reading. “The kid’s made a choice, apparently. Good for him.” He blinked in surprise, taking in the next few lines. “*And* he pushed the envelope. The whole squad, huh?”

“The kid? What kid?” Salista asked, confused. “What squad are you talking about?”

“Aria’s,” Carmen answered with a grin, now. “Turns out that new boyfriend of hers has even more guts than I thought...”

Salista stared at him, mouth dropping open slightly.

Carmen realized his mistake too late.

“Wait... You didn’t kn—?”

“I’m sorry,” she cut him off with a wheezing snarl. “Her new *WHAT?*?”

CHAPTER 12

Mid January, 2469 - One Week Later

Astra System – Astra-3 – Sector 9

PLACEHOLDER

-PLACEHOLDER

Rei entered the fray with a roar, hurtling into the chaos shield-first to take Hannah Tethers squarely in the back. The poor Lancer—who’d unfortunately been too

preoccupied with her precarious footing and keeping Catcher's weaving slices at bay to see Rei—was blasted off her feet with such force that Catcher himself had to curse and whirl out of the way to avoid the girl's flailing limbs as she rocketed by with a screech of pain and surprise.

“Hey! Watch the friendly fire!” the Saber yelled even as he docked sideways across the slippery sand to join Aria in a battle against both Kastro Vademe and Lena Jiang.

“Sorry!” Rei called back sincerely, already turning in the opposite direction towards where Chancery fought back to back with Laquita Martin along the crest of the closest dune, facing off against the rest of Valormade. With a flying leap he launched himself straight at Jasmine Ranjha's exposed flank, yelling as he did.

“Type Shift! Brawler Mode!”

Shido transformed in a whirling blink, and a second later he slammed into the Mauler's blindside with both fists leading the way, the black of the Device's six blue-lined steel claws sinking more than half-a-foot right through her reactive shielding straight into bone and muscle. Ranjha roared as she collapsed when her left leg gave out in shock, letting go of her massive hammer with one hand to try to elbow him in the side of the head. His HUD—the heads-up display projected over the inside of Shido's faceplate—highlighted the flying limb in flashing red and a rapidly-descending numerical value that Rei assumed indicated the distance between him and a broken nose.

The number didn't have time to hit 0 before Ranjha's strike—and her yelling—ended abruptly, cut short when Rei violently twisted both sets of claws before wrenching them loose of her body.

She hadn't even stopped twitching by the time he was lancing back into the fight, heading straight for Kay this time, shouting for Phalanx Mode again.

The Desert variation they were fighting on was a dune-filled expanse under the brightening sky of a blooming day. To the east the sun was just rising over the horizon,

casting them all in orange and purple and making the highlights of their team-assigned colors—red for Valormade and Blue for Firesong and Martin—shimmer and glow in the growing light. The result was a maelstrom of flash vysetrium and brutal sound, the sands swallowing the echoes of the fight even as grunts and screams and the crash of blades rippled over the desert. They were barely a minute into the bout, with Firesong and Martin having rushed straight for the center where the single 7-foot tall pole of black metal that was the match objective stood straight and true at the peak of in the middle of the field. Valormade, of course, had done much the same, resulting in the all-out war that so common in King of the Hill formats. Vademe had been clever, though—even more so than usual—and had sent Lena Jiang in a narrow loop through the canyons to the south. The result had been a momentary imbalance in the fight at the pole, but the Saber was famously frighteningly quick for her Type, and had circled around behind Firesong within a few seconds of the battle for the objective breaking out. Logan had been the one to get caught in Jiang’s trap, having been engaged with the Phalanx Xander Phillips at the time and unaware of the girl bolting in behind him. In a flash Rei’s squadmates had been cut down from five to four, with the year’s top Saber at their backs.

Not that it had mattered much.

Kay was a vicious fighter, probably the best Lancer in the class other than maybe Chancery and Vademe himself, but Rei had more than week now to get used to his Phalanx Mode, and he plied every ounce of ability he gained in those long hours. There was no way he would have won against the girl cleanly, but after some 10 seconds of exchanged blows he saw a chance and ducked under a wide sweep of Kay’s spear—the weapon and its User both highlighted in the thin red outline Shido’s HUD used to denote “enemy”. As expected the Lancer had assumed he would block the blow, this made clear by her hissed curse when her blade sheared empty air where shield should have been. Even worse of her, by the time Rei came up again, Shido was in its Saber

form, and the longer sword that was suddenly in his right managed to cleave through the Lancer's left wrist, sending her staggering with a scream.

When he was done with Kay, Phillips was next, and the Phalanx, too, swore when he was forced to throw himself bodily down the incline of the dune to avoid the pincer attack of Chancery and Rei both closing in on him like wolves on the hunt.

They weren't even feet from him when the sound of the Arena rang out across the sands.

"Contact with Red Team's objective maintained for 15 seconds. Winner: Blue Team."

Skidding to suck an abrupt halt that he and Chancery both inadvertently sprayed Phillips with sand, Rei turned to look up the hill. The first thing he saw were a blue-outlined Aria letting off an exhausted-looking Vademe—Jiang's fallen body was in the midst of being reabsorbed by the field. Beyond them, though, Laquita Martin stood proud, one elbow pressed up against the black pole, her own blue outline blinking to white just as Vademe's red did the same. The vysetrium of the Duelist's blades, too, was already changing back to grayish-white as the team-assigned blue faded with the end of the match.

"Nice!" Catcher shouted from where he'd been in the process of picking himself up out of the sand, apparently having been kicked down the hill just before the victory was announced. Chancery, too, congratulated the Duelist's smart play, while Aria nodded in agreement right before the field started to dissolve around them.

As all the remaining "survivors" among the two teams started to descend to the floor of the Arena—the projection plating coming quickly back into view 10 feet below them—Rei couldn't bring himself to do even that.

“Recall,” he muttered under his breath instead as he slowly dropped, not even blinking as Shido’s full-body armor whirled back into its bands and his HUD vanished from his vision.

“Gooood fight, everyone. Form up at the east entrance, if you would. The Lieutenant will see to your debrief.”

Unable to turn around while in midair, Firesong, Martin, and Valormade had to wait until everyone had touched down—and a few had gotten to their feet—before turning around to salute up at Valera Dent. The Captain was suspended some 15 feet above them on the floating disc of solid white light that the instructors always used to oversee the matches, and was nodding down at them in approval as she pointed off to the left, where Catori Imala was waiting at one of the four entrances that led from the floor down to the underworks. There was a collective “Yes, ma’am!” from the 12 of them, and they all took off at a jog in the Lieutenant’s direction just as Dent started navigating the observation platform towards the north side of the floor, where a different pair of first-year teams was having an Elimination bout. Like all the squads other than Firesong, Valormade, and Red Crown, they were both makeshift groups, and Rei only caught a glimpse of who he thought was the Duelist Janice Owens duking it out with and Lancer Sam Dorne atop a plain Neutral Zone before Imala called them all to attention.

“Alright! I heard the Captain congratulate you all on a good fight, so I won’t be blowing more smoke up your collective asses.” The Lieutenant took them all in keenly. “It was a nice match, but nothing about it was flawless. Who can tell me how and when they messed up?”

Unsurprisingly, 12 hands rose in the air.

To be fair, Martin’s volunteering to do some extra matches by standing in for Viv meant that every first year there had been a Sectional competitor, and you didn’t rise to the top at the Galens Institute in *any* year by being coy with yourself about your

weaknesses. It took barely 5 minutes for each of them to cover their self-review with the Lieutenant, then another 5 to cross-exam each other with outside thoughts. By that point the teams that had replaced Firesong and Valormade on the south Team Battle field had wrapped up their own match, and were on their way towards where Michael Bretz stood waiting on the west side of the floor. Imala dismissed them all with a wave, and the 12 of them shouted a quick “Thank you, ma’am!” before slipping by and down into the underworks.

“Man, I am *loving* this cross-over day!” Predictably, Catcher was the first to let his enthusiasm get the best of him the moment they were down the ramp and around the corner into the tunnels under the stands. “It’s a whole *world* different when the whole year is doing combat training all together!”

“Isn’t it??” Xander Phillip answered excitedly. Rei had never had much opportunity to chat with the Phalanx, and had generally been under the impression the dark-haired boy was more of the somber sort until that very afternoon. “And they’re happening *every* Friday, now!”

“Wednesdays, too,” Vademe reminded him a little more levelly from the front of the group while they all headed towards the closest set of stairs. “But I agree. It’s nice.”

“And makes sense,” Jasmine Ranjha offered from where she walked along just behind Rei. “Even just officially keeping the Sectionals squads together means having to get all the class blocks together at some point during the week.”

“As if we need it to be official,” Lena Jiang muttered from up just behind Vademe. “It’s not like all our squads aren’t doing extra hours every evening to keep our teamwork on point.” She sucked on her teeth in annoyance. “Even *if* we aren’t going to have another chance at tournament combat for a whole *year*.”

At this added grumble, Rei couldn’t help but briefly meet Aria’s eye when she glancing over her shoulder at him.

Setting aside that he had to work much harder than usual not to call Jiang out for being a sour grape, Rei had to admit to a bit of annoyance at Central Command—or at least more than usual. Despite being told the week before by Carmen Laurent that the ISCM would be opening Systems and Intersystems to first-year competitors, there had been no official announcement of the like since. To be fair, Aria’s father hadn’t given them a timeline on *when* that news would be made public, but the longer it went without everyone knowing, the more Rei felt like he and the rest of Firesong were unfairly sitting on a competitive advantage. Sure, Valormade and Martin’s Red Crown *were* doing extra evening hours—Firesong had crossed paths with both groups at East Center more than once since returning from Sectionals—but it felt like Rei and the others were hiding a whole different reason why the other squads should be pushing themselves to stay in peak form and keep improving. Firesong had been the Sector 9 Team Battle champions, yes, but *both* Vademe and Martin’s squads had edged them out in the Wargames, with Valormade actually earning themselves that gold outright. If Central was going to be pulling squads from across every system to compete, Rei very much doubted Firesong would be the only Galens first years getting the invitation.

Fortunately, Logan had the good sense to steer the conversation out of potentially awkward waters.

“I was worried we’d be going back to just one-on-one stuff after we got back to school, but kinda feels like the opposite, doesn’t it?” he asked as Aria and Vademe led the way around the corner and up the stairs towards the stands. “Twice a week with all class block *plus* the coordination and team elements we’re sometimes doing in regular training... If anything it feels like they’re gonna be pushing squad-format stuff more and more.”

Rei made a mental note to thank the Mauler later for his quick thinking as Phillips, Ranjha, and Hannah Tethers all nodded in agreement. As big an SCT nerd as him or Catcher, there was no way Logan didn’t already know from deep-diving into the alumni

feeds and the like that the Galens curriculum indeed skewed more towards team-based training as the three years progressed. They were soldiers first, after all, and Users on the front lines rarely deployed without squads. Group tactics and team training would be a focus starting that semester.

As would another important skill Rei was *very* much looking forward to working on soon...

The others killed the time it took to reach the stands and move around the walkway with small talk and chatter about their fight. Reaching the centermost of the west spectator sections where the rest of the first years not fighting were scatted among the bottom 10 or so rows of seats, Valormade said their farewells—along with a last couple calls of “Good fight!”—before heading further along the walkway towards an empty line further up the walkway.

“Ya’ll probably got a half hour or so before your next fight, right?” Martin asked Aria. “Red Crown is supposed to be up in 10, so I should be good to help you out again if our match doesn’t take forever for some reason.”

“As far as I know, yeah,” Aria answered, pulling up what looked like a schedule on her NOED and reviewing it briefly. “According to what Dent sent us before training, at least.” She closed her frame to dip her head at the Duelist. “Thanks again for filling in. Definitely keeps things a bit more smooth than doing five on six a bunch of times in a row.”

“Hey, no problem,” Martin said with a grin and a double thumbs up as she started to backpedal after Valormade. “If you need anything, I’m happy to help. I’ll catch you guys in a bit, then.”

She left them with Catcher and Chancery also offering their thanks at her back. Rei, though, watched her go with narrowed eyes, that annoyance that had been simmering in his gut all afternoon anything but appeased by the Red Crown leader’s departure.

“She seems... enthusiastic...”

Rei, surprised, looked around to find Logan watching Martin retreating too. The Mauler had muttered the words—almost like he’d been hesitant to say them aloud—but Rei didn’t miss Aria’s pained expression that said she’d also overheard.

“She’s just... trying to help. I think.”

“Uh huh,” Rei and Logan both grumbled in answer together.

Aria didn’t say anything to that, though her expression didn’t change as she waved for them to follow her up the stairs. They did so, and a minute later they were all sitting a few rows up from the walkways, each of them picking either the north or south Team Battle matches to watch.

“You don’t *actually* think Martin’s angling for anything. Right...?” Chancery asked the group aloud after a minute of all of them sitting silent.

In the corner of his eye Rei saw Logan glance at him, but he decided it was probably best to keep his own mouth shut for once.

It was a rare day that he just didn’t trust being able to test the limits of his own patience.

“Since when has Laquita Martin been so keen on helping us out?” Logan asked the Lancer in answer. “Or anyone, for that matter?”

“Come on, she’s not *that* bad,” Catcher tried to counter. “She’s in my class and she...” he seemed to hesitate, as though abruptly rethinking his position “... fine.”

“Fine?” Aria asked.

“Uh... Yeah. I mean... I guess she’s not *known* for being happy-bubbly or anything like that, but at least she not as bad as some people. Like Jiang. Or Joy.”

“That’s not a high bar, man,” Rei couldn’t stop himself from grumbling.

A second later, the hairs on his arm stood on end as he felt Aria’s fingertips on his shoulder. She’d reached across herself with a hand to touch him gently, as though

attempting to calm him down even though she wasn't looking at him. Instead, she kept talking to Catcher like nothing else was going on.

"I'm gonna choose to believe she's just giving us a hand." She spoke like she was trying to convince herself as much as any of them. "It doesn't matter. *If* she's angling for anything else, she's out of luck, isn't she?"

"Damn right she is," Logan's answering growl came.

They settled back into relative silence after that, Catcher and Chancery talking about the south field fight where Sense was the last of his team left standing against the Phalanx Connor Fae and the Saber Kasper Valente. Logan was staring off towards the north field, but he didn't really seem to be taking it in.

Rei, meanwhile, hadn't realized he'd taken to studying the cement between his feet again when the message hit his NOED.

You sure you don't want me to come?

Rei thought it said something about how much he liked Aria that he found the question more endearing than anything else, given it was probably the twentieth time since the afternoon before that she'd asked this question. He even smiled a little, some of the nervous, frustrated energy that had had him on edge for the last 24 hours dissipating a little.

I'm sure, he answered back quickly. *But thanks.*

Can you at least take someone? How about Catcher?

Rei snorted, and shook his head without looking up from the floor.

If I don't want to go with you, what makes you think I'd want to go with anyone else?

I don't know... came the reply. I just don't like the idea of you going alone.

I won't be alone. Jasper said she'd meet me at the gate.

That's not even remotely comforting, and you know it.

Rei allowed himself a slight chuckle, and managed to glance sidelong at Aria. She was determinedly looking the other way though, staring off at the north field too, though clearly seeing no more of the fight there than Logan was.

"I'll be fine," he told her quietly, forcing himself to sit back in his seat so that the projection unit in the stone beneath him manifested the invisible back to rest against. He leaned over in her direction slightly, bumping her shoulder with his. "Promise."

She didn't look around at him, but offered a little nod as she reached out squeezed his forearm for a second.

Aria had excellent reason to be worried, of course. They'd gotten word Wednesday afternoon that Viv had shown any changes in her condition despite the UTU doctors' hopes that she was going to start improving soon, and Aria had confided in Rei that she'd gotten a pretty poignant message from her mother earlier in the week, though she'd dodged answering when he'd tried asking her what it was about. Add that to the slow rollout by Central about the new first-year bracket announcements, and Aria's week would have been bad enough.

Then Rei had gotten the message from Jasper after combat training the previous afternoon.

East gate tomorrow. 1800, it had read simply. Don't worry, it's supposed to be warm out.

It wasn't like Rei had forgotten about the promised meeting at any point in the past week. On the contrary, it had been present between each of his thoughts since the fixer had let him know it was happening, and had even kept him up later than he would have liked every night as he'd turned over his anger, fears, and doubts while staring up at the dark ceiling of his room. Jasper's confirmation of the time and place, though, had

born with it a strange sort of weight, a solidifying of the reality of what he was—or at least suspected he was—about to face.

The question ‘*What if I’m wrong?*’ was, oddly enough, not half as daunting as ‘*What if I’m right?*’

Rei took a slow breath, careful to avoid letting his stress out audibly so as not to worry Aria any more than she already was. He hadn’t told the others about the meeting, yet. He wasn’t sure he was going to, either. Aria was one thing. He *needed* her to know. In a similar way as he’d *needed* to tell her about Shido and its Growth spec all those months back. If Viv was there, Rei knew he’d have told her too, but the others... It just wasn’t a thing he was ready to share with them. Not now. Probably not until he had a handle on whatever said ‘thing’ ended up being.

Lifting his head, Rei did his best to swallow his nerves, to push down on that angry, anxious energy Jasper’s last message had stoked into glowing embers. He got himself to focus on the north field with Aria and Logan instead, and after a minute managed to get out a forced question about if he’d missed the news that the Duelist Candice Brett had achieved an evolution since he’d last seen her fight.

Lucky for him, the two on either side of him were obviously as keen to think about anything but whatever was going on in their own heads, and they soon had a simple—if strained—conversation going on about how many of the first years were starting to see big changes in the CADs, and how it probably wouldn’t be long before more initial Abilities started manifesting throughout the class.

Some 20 minutes or so later, a short ping to their frames told them all it was time to get on deck again, and they descended the steps once more to meet Martin on the walkway. The Duelist—who was still sweating from an extended fight alongside her own squad that had ended not 5 minutes before—*immediately* started to chat up Aria, who Rei was pleased answered much more reservedly now than she had for the first half of the class.

Their third match of the day was a simple Elimination bout against a scattered group consisting of Archie Brawn and Allan Pearson from 1-B, Emmanuel Ramir, Yasiin Najjar, and Jae-Song Gwan from 1-D, and Tad Emble from their own class. Having some unfortunate history with Emble—one that involved a bloodied nose and a lot of bad memories of a cold marble floor—the fight turned out more therapeutic than Rei had expected when he ended up in a 2-on-1 fight with the Brawler and Amir, a Mauler. The pair of them managed to corner him in a riverbed on the Cliffs variation that had forced Firesong to scatter a bit more than they might usually have otherwise, and to their credit the two had worked well together despite being from different class blocks. Rei might even have complimented them after the fight were Emble not involved, but as it was he had neither the sympathy nor patience to be more than coldly calculating. For once he allowed himself to stay in Brawler Mode since it was the form he had the most experience in, and after managing to down Amir with a paralyzing slash to the upper back, Rei had to force himself not to take his time dismantling Emble little by little.

As it was, the Brawler's FDA turned out to be the last "kill" Firesong needed, because it was as he slumped limply off Rei's claws to splash down into the water that the Arena announced their victory.

Their fourth and final match went much the same way, with Firesong walking off the Flood Zone field with barely a scratch after a quick round against another scattered group of classmates. After that there was the standard review and a brief lecture from Dent on where the first years as a whole still had the opportunity to see improvement, and then they were dismissed to the showers.

The entire walk to and from the locker room, as well as the time they spent getting cleaned up and changed back into their black-and-golds, Rei only barely registered what the others were talking about. He was pretty sure Catcher tried to engage him a couple of times with questions about how he was adjusting to his Phalanx Mode or if Shido's

new HUD had been of much use, but he'd been too zoned out to really hear his friend, and thought Aria might have hinted that the Saber should leave him alone for the time being. They left the Arena together, but as the others reached the bottom of the entrance stairs and started automatically heading for the mess hall, Rei held up just outside the building.

"I'm headed this way," he said, pointing over his shoulder around the edge of the stadium. "I'll meet you guys at dinner in a bit if I can."

"Where are you—*youch!*" Catcher didn't get to finish his question before Aria stood on his foot. "What was *that* for??"

Aria ignored him, moving back to stand in front of Rei instead.

"I'll save you something from the mess if you aren't done by the time we're getting going," she told him just loud enough for the others to hear. "We're headed to East Center and 1930 if you just want to see us there instead."

"Yeah, sounds good," he told her, managing to get out of his own head enough to smile gratefully at her. "Not sure how long I'll be, though."

"That's okay. Just join up when you can." Aria dropped her voice then, and stepped a little closer. "And let me know you're okay when you're done, ok?"

Before he could answer, she kissed him lightly on the cheek, squeezed his arm once, then turned back to firmly tell the team they were headed to dinner.

"Hold on, what about—?" Catcher tried to start again, but was cut short once more when he started yelling and dancing in pain when Aria took him by the ear and began dragging him along without so much as a glance back.

Rei almost smiled again, and did nod in silent assurance as Logan and Chancery both hesitated to look with some concern between him and where the poor Saber was working on prying himself loose of Aria's grip.

"I'll catch you guys later," he told them simply, hoping they'd get the hint. "Just something I've got to do."

Mercifully, neither was quite as overzealous as Catcher, and after moment they just nodded in understanding before jogging to follow after the other two in the direction of the mess.

Rei let himself watch them all go for only a few seconds before he forced himself to turn and head down his own chosen path, pulling his gloves and a black scarf out of his school bag as he did.

Jasper's idea of 'warm' was a little subjective, he thought. It was well above freezing, fortunately, and between the sun still hanging just above the line of Castalon and his regulars being as hefty as a winter jacket when they needed to despite their appearance, he was comfortable enough. Still, it *was* January, and as he made the lengthy loop around the Arena and into the shadows of the massive building on the other side, Rei didn't miss that he could see his own breath.

Good, he managed to convince himself. It'll help me clear my head.

Without so much as a glance around, he made a line east through the campus. Galens' handsome steel and glass buildings reflect the sun and blue sky above, and he crossed paths with a scattering of second- and third-year students as he walked, though even when most of them watched him pass with interest he avoided meeting any of their eyes. He was too preoccupied, too focused on the moment that lay ahead.

That, and the beating of his own heart that he could feel getting faster the closer he got to the edge of campus.

The wall loomed steadily nearer, and before long, Rei found himself passing the last line of buildings before the stone defenses, and he had to work not to stare upward while he approached. Nearly as tall as the walls themselves, the grand metal gate—kept shut per tradition—was anything but a simple slab of steel. On the contrary, it was handsomely adorned with a massive etching cut shallowly into its surface, like some of the wood carvings he'd seen pictures of that decorated some of the 1000-year-old cathedrals and churches on Earth. From high, high above him the Galens griffin

seemed to gaze down on Rei imperiously, its attention neither menacing nor benevolent, neither kind nor cruel. The tips of its outstretched wings reached just shy of the walls itself, and the outline of a banner hung straight and true behind the diamond the great beast stood within.

And just under the bottom edge of this engraving, a lone officer Rei didn't know stood at ease, yellowish eyes following his approach.

"Cadet Ward?" the man asked formally as soon as Rei was close enough, pulling a small pad from around his back.

"Yes, sir!" Rei answered with a salute, coming to stop an arm's length in front of the officer, who he saw now was marked with the insignia of a warrant officer.

"Eyes up, Cadet, if you would be so kind."

Rei met the officer's gaze as instructed, and after a brief flash of light in his eyes the man glanced down at his pad.

"Confirmed," he said after moment, nodding as something popped up on his screen, unseen by Rei from the other side. "You're a little early, but that shouldn't be an issue. I think she's waiting outside already."

Rei's heart hammered harder.

"Outside... sir?" he asked hesitantly, unable to help but glance up at the griffin that soars above him now, gleaming in the sunlight.

The warrant officer didn't miss the look, and smirked.

"Over here," he said, dipping his head towards the gate before starting to move towards the bottom right corner of the unblemished steel. Leading the way to a section that looked exactly like any other square chunk of the door, the man paused as his eyes flashed again, then he reached out and swiped a hand up the surface before him.

To Rei's astonishment, a blue square immediately appeared at chest height, crowned with the blinking words 'IDENTITY VERIFICATION REQUIRED'.

“Don’t look so surprised, Cadet,” the warrant officer said with barely more than a glance back as he pulled a glove off to press his bare palm into the square. “I’ve heard you’ve got a good head on your shoulders. Hopefully you can understand the value of a secondary entrance to the campus. One that’s a little more private than the south gate.”

“Uh... yes, sir,” Rei answered as quickly as he could as the wall—obviously a solid-light projection made to mimic exactly the look and feel of the steel around it—flashed once, then displayed a short list of optional activation commands. In truth he’d never considered it, but certainly it did make sense. Galens not infrequently played host to some major SCTs, and between that and the occasional tournament and front-line superstars that made guest lectures to the upper classes, he *could* indeed see the value in a back door to the school.

The warrant officer selected his command, and a moment later the section of the wall faded away entirely. In its place, a tunnel maybe 10 feet tall had formed, shaped like a wide wide triangle with a good chunk of its top point cut off. Gesturing for Rei to follow, the man strode right inside without a backwards glance.

There was something awesome and ominous about passing under what Rei roughly calculated was several *million* pounds of solid steel. The way wasn’t dark, to be fair. Even without the sun shining ahead and behind there was a staggered divot in the metal every few feet that housed a small solar light to illuminate the way. Just the same, Rei couldn’t help but feel the weight of the metal above him, a foreboding promise that was even more impressive all on its own than the decorations of the gate or even the walls themselves. For all Rei knew, that was a deliberate effect of the tunnel’s design, actually. A means by which to display the will of the proud Galens Institute to even the most powerful of visitors.

Whatever the reason, Rei didn't even realize he'd *completely* blanked on why he was there until after they were out and back in the sun, at which point he at once not only remembered how to breath again, but stopped short.

What in the MIND...?

Ahead of him, a woman waited expectantly in the very center of the east gate's landing platform. A woman in a trim black butler's uniform, standing with her white-gloved hands clasped patiently in front of her.

A woman Rei didn't remotely recognize.

"Off you get, Cadet," the warrant officer told him, indicating the stranger with a tip of his head. "I'll be here till you've wrapped things up, whatever it is you're doing out here." The man sounded a little curious for the first time. "Not that it's my business, but a first year getting handed off to a civi chaperone for the evening isn't something you hear happening often."

"Yes, sir," Rei answered absently, not really hearing the man as he studied the woman ahead of him. When he registered what the officer had said, though, he quickly spun and saluted. "I-I mean thank you, sir. I'll be back as soon as I can be."

And with that half-truth, he turned again and made his way uncertainly towards the stranger.

Aside from the butler's suit, there wasn't all too much out of the ordinary about the woman. She bore no CAD that he could see, and was of average height and build, with long, dark brown hair decorated with two stylish streaks of a pale orange that framed her face, the rest brought back into a long ponytail that stuck out from the back of her head to hang down to her waist. She had what Rei had taken to thinking of as 'western features' after he'd spent some time digging into the Kamiya Corporation, and while she wasn't classically pretty, there was something endearing about her gentle features and kind smile, practiced and held with perfect calm as Rei approached. The one striking element of her face, on the other hand, were her eyes. They were pale to

the point of nearly being white, and despite sensing not so much as an ounce of hostility from the woman, there was something in that gaze that made him so cautious as he closed the distance between them that he nearly stopped dead again. Her attention was welcoming, yes. Rei would even have gone so far as to call it ‘warm’. But it was also keen and unflinching, steadily taking him in with just as much calculation as consideration.

Rei felt like he was walking towards a trusting lioness, one who had faith he wasn’t there to hurt her cubs, but was prepared—and very able—of tearing him limb from limb if he chose to disappoint her.

He’d been expecting Ueno Jasper—hadn’t even considered she wouldn’t be there, in fact—but despite the fixer’s apparent absence Rei realized with something like stressed amusement that he’d somehow still ended up in the company of yet another non-User who he suspected crossing would be tantamount to suicide.

“Hello, Reidon.” The woman’s voice was pleasant as a spring breeze as she addressed him once he was close enough. “It’s nice to meet you.”

Rei stopped just shy of what might have been polite, looking her up and down warily. Sure enough, she *wasn’t* a User, but there was still something about the woman that made him want to avoid getting within her reach...

“Hi...” he answered cautiously. “Uh... Sorry... Who are you?”

The woman’s smile only widened.

“I’m Abigail Smith,” she answered warmly, and he realized she lacked the telling accent Jasper’s speech had hinted at. “Presently I am the steward of the Kamiya family estate.”

Rei’s eyebrows rose at that. He wasn’t sure why—he had absolutely no concept of what a ‘steward’ did other than what he’d read in some old fantasy books when he was a kid—but for some reason he couldn’t help but be impressed by this announcement. The woman—Abigail Smith—couldn’t have been 30 years old by his guess, but seemed

to hold what he could only imagine had to be a *very* important position in the employment of what he knew was a *very* important family.

At that thought, though, Rei's insides did an uncomfortable little dance, and he reminded himself he wasn't there to be intimidated by strangers.

"I was expecting Ueno Jasper..." he said slowly, looking to either side of Smith curiously, like the Jasper was hiding in the trees growing beyond the edge of the east gate platform behind the woman.

"Regrettably, Jasper was unable to make it. She does send her apologies about that, and asked me to assure you that you'll be seeing her very soon."

"Uh... And that's a good thing...?"

For the first time, the keen edge in the steward's pale eyes actually softened in truth. Replacing it, a twinkle of amusement shined through.

"I think that will be up to you to decide at the time of meeting," Smith answered with a light chuckle. "If I had to guess, though, the benefits will outweigh any discomfort you might suffer. At least in the long term."

Before Rei could follow up on *that* cryptic little tidbit, however, the woman stepped out of the way and bowed shallowly as she swept an arm due east, indicating the woods.

"I imagine, though, that you're less keen on sitting here chatting with me than you are on your *actual* meeting. If you'll follow me, I'll take you to him now."

Him, Rei repeated to himself, a small jolt of adrenaline cutting up his body as he nodded automatically. It was a broad hint, but it was still a nice confirmation to have.

He was so preoccupied with this minuscule revelation, in fact, that they were at the very edge of the platform before he really registered what Smith had said.

"Wait... here?" he asked, frowning up at the mostly-empty branches above them. Only a scattering of the trees that made up the the forest beyond Galens' four walls were evergreens, so much of the woods rose up like clawing fingers towards the blue sky.

“Yes, here,” Smith answered without hesitation, indicating the way ahead of them. Looking around her as he continued to follow, he realized she was leading him towards a cobbled path that led off the platform into the forest. Miles of such stone paths wound their way through the trees, and he at once felt a little better *and* more confused.

Whether because she sensed his lack of understanding or because she just felt the need to explain, the steward continued.

“My employer is a... rather busy man, Reidon.” She stepped into the lengthening shadows of the trees without hesitating. “He doesn’t have much time to himself, so he tends to take in the world when he can. Even a place as simple as this.” She gestured around her head at the leafless trees and the traffic-laden skylines far above. She dropped her arm to continue pressing forward, but after a time seemed to think there was more to say.

“That... and we thought you might be more comfortable having this discussion somewhere close to home.”

Regrettably, Rei didn’t hear this clarifying statement. In fact, he’d barely heard a word after the first couple Smith had answered with. He knew now, after all. He knew with a near-certainty.

And with that certainty came clarity, and a final, hard tempering of the nervous energy that had been bouncing around in his gut with increasing violence throughout the past week.

They only walked for a minute or two, neither saying another word as Smith led the way. She seemed content in the silence, while Rei used the time to steady himself, to take advantage of this newfound calm gifted to him by the awareness of who it was he was meeting. They took a bend in the path, then another, until the steward led him into a small copse of spruce trees that abruptly gave the world life again. They took one final turn, and Smith halted.

Then she bowed, lower now than she had for Rei, arms to her sides and her long hair spilling down over one shoulder.

“I’ve brought him for you, Doctor.”

Rei stopped beside the woman, partially out of politeness, but mostly out of uncertainty. He did not, however, bow. He was aware it would have been the proper thing to do, had learned as much in his digging into the company that had so recently turned his world upside down. A bow, however, indicated respect.

And as far as he suspected, there was no respect due to the man before him, the man in a dark suite-coat who in the process of turning towards him with hands clasped behind his back, gaze dropping from where he’d been looking wistfully up at the trees before Smith had called out to him.

The man with black hair turning to silver, and sharp, handsome lines of many long years creasing the corner of his slate-grey eyes.

For a long moment, the two of them only stood there, taking each other in. Neither moved. Neither spoke. Rei wasn’t sure what it was the man was seeing, but for his part he was having a hard time with looking into those eyes. Those damn *eyes*...

At long last, it was Doctor Kamiya Hiroto, CEO of the Kamiya Corporation, who broke the silence.

“... Can I assume you already know who I am, Reidon?”

His voice was... odd. Tight. The doctor’s expression was taut, unmoving, but Rei thought he more had the look of a man having to work hard to maintain a composure that usually came easy to him than anything else.

He was glad he wasn’t the only one struggling.

“That... is a loaded question,” Rei answered after a beat, choosing his words with care. “I know your name, if that’s what you’re asking. I know your title.” He narrowed his eyes at the man, feeling a low thrum of anger start work its way upwards inside him.

“Now I know—assuming Jasper kept her promise—that you’re also the guy who wanted me in your corner so badly that you were willing to offer a *first year* the moon.”

The corner of Kamiya’s mouth twitched, almost like he’d stopped himself from smiling.

“In my corner’...” the doctor repeated to himself quietly, letting out a sigh that was somewhere between resigned and frustrated. “Yes... I suppose that’s one way to put it, isn’t it?”

“Is there another way?” Rei didn’t like that his hands were clenched at his sides. He wanted—needed—to calm down.

“Oh yes. Infinitely other ways, I’m afraid.” The doctor’s eyes flicked down briefly to his fists, but he made no comment about them. “All of which you have the right hear. Have for a long time, in fact.”

That statement, that simple, easy statement, sucked much of the fire out of Rei then. It wasn’t gone, per se. Hardly. It was more like the air had been pulled from his lungs, the fuel that had fed it momentarily sucked away.

‘A long time’? Did that mean—?

“Abigail, Reidon and I are going to go for a walk,” Kamiya told his steward, his grey eyes lifting to her. “Stay here, if you’d be so kind.”

In the corner of his vision Rei saw something other than benevolent warmth on the woman’s face for the first time, the surprise at this order brief, but obvious.

“Here? But, sir—”

“Here,” Kamiya confirmed gently, cutting her off as he raised a hand to motion that Rei should join him. “I will appraise you of our discussion later, I am sure. For the time being, though... I’m afraid this is a family matter.”

CHAPTER 13

Rei followed Kamiya Hiroto in something of a daze for the minute or so the man led him deeper into the woods. Once more they didn't speak, with the doctor seemingly content to simply walk just ahead of him for a time, his head moving slowly this way and that as he took in the forest around them.

They were well into the trees, the sun cutting through the density of the leafless branches in fading rays of light across their misting breaths, when Kamiya stopped.

Then finally spoke.

"I'm going to ask you a question, Reidon. I don't imagine it's going to be an easy one to answer, so do please feel free to take your time."

Rei blinked, yanked uncomfortably from his shell shock. He stared at the man's back, gloved hands still clasped behind him, grey eyes still on the trees.

"...Okay...?" Rei got out after a second, unsure of how else to respond.

Similarly, it apparently took Kamiya a moment to form his own words.

"... What needs to be done to make this right?"

The question hung in the silence between them for a long time, echoing soundlessly in the quiet. Rei felt the anger bubbling into life again with every passing second, but eventually he forced it down, forced himself not to let the fire overcome him. There would be time for that heat.

It just wasn't now.

"I think that would depend on what 'this' is..." He drew the words out slowly, deliberately. "Wouldn't it... uh... Doctor?"

Kamiya had half turned his face to listen as Rei answered, and at the hesitation in being addressed something a little like pain passed across his features.

"'Doctor' is fine. For now at least. But yes, that's a fair judgment. I suppose I am making the assumption that you have already deduced much of the situation, based on your last exchange with Jasper."

“A deduction isn’t more than a best guess without confirmation,” Rei answered coolly.

His heart was hammering again. He wished it wasn’t. Between that and the fury he was wrestling with it made it hard to figure out exactly what he was thinking—much less *feeling*—as he spoke.

Kamiya nodded again. “You want the truth,” he said simply. Not a question so much as a statement, but there was still a request somewhere in there.

Rei had to stop himself from yelling that he less wanted it and more had *earned* it. With blood, sweat, tears, and *years* of pain, he had *earned* it.

Instead, he decided to borrow a page from Aria’s book.

“You’re damn right I do,” he growled.

Kamiya swallowed. It seems an... odd thing to witness. From the moment they’d met Rei had had the distinct impression this man was generally one of acute inscrutability. An unyielding object who only moved when *he* decided to, and then moved with such terrifying force as to make whole planets flinch in response. And yet here Kamiya Hiroto was, clearly finding it hard to look him in the face.

For the first time, Rei began to wonder if there was more going on here than even *he* had wondered about.

All at once, the doctor turned to him in full, eyes moving to meet his again. Sure enough, there was a *will* there, an unbending, unshaking will.

And yet when the man spoke, his voice still had that edge of strain to it.

“Would you prefer I lay it out for you, or would you like to first tell me what it is you’ve already surmised?”

Rei felt his brow furrow. *There* was an offer he hadn’t seen coming. He hadn’t expected a man like Kamiya Hiroto to be forthcoming in *any* situation, much less one as delicate as this. Rei found himself, with as much a wave of confusion as renewed anger, having difficulty getting a sense of the man.

Maybe that was why the words spilled out of him before he could stop himself.

“I’m Kamiya blood.” He barely managed to keep himself from spitting out the words. “Probably your kid? By some affair you didn’t want coming out? Then again, maybe not. I thought I might have been some relative’s, some branch family’s, but I went back 200 years of public records and these—” he jerked a hand up to indicate his eyes “—seem to be almost exclusively limited only to the main line. Couldn’t find an example of them being passed on even a generation beyond those who marry out. So props there for making sure no one designs their kids without permission. At least you follow up with *them*.” He sneered at the irony.

Kamiya, on the other hand, only frowned as he listened, which was fine with Rei. He had plenty more to say.

“I wasn’t wanted. Don’t know why, but I’ve got a guess or two. One more solid than the other, given whoever it was who left me at the hospital at least bothered to give me a *first* name before they bailed. And because I wasn’t wanted, I was forgotten. Or maybe you thought I died. Or hoped I did. I don’t know. Doesn’t matter. No one ever came back. No one ever visited, or even checked in. I was left behind, totally and completely. I was left behind.”

The tautness in the doctor’s face was more pronounced.

“That’s when we get the present, though.” Rei couldn’t help the fury from leaking out into his words, now. “That’s when we get to the *fun* part, Doctor. See... I made it. With the help of one *really* good friend, and then a couple more. I *made it*. I’m one of the lucky few, and the lucky *fewer* who did it missing two arms and leg, figuratively speaking.” His words were coming through clenched teeth. “I started to build a reputation. I started to gain just a *bit* of notoriety. People are beginning to know my name. Who I am. Not really sure how I feel about that yet, but it’s irrelevant. It’s happening. I have a future. For the first time in my *damn* life, I *actually* have a future. One with potential. One with promise. One *without* pain.” He grinned, then, a hard,

angry leer tainted with the twisted hilarity of it all. Lifting an arm, he jerked the sleeve of his black-and-golds back with with other hand, revealing Shido and the scars that decorated his skin in an ugly pattern of faint slashes and faded dots. “*That* was a change, I have to tell you. I got good at not showing it, but these...” he patted the exposed arm to indicate the scars, “these *hurt*, Doctor. And a hell of a lot less than what they were *fixing*.” He dropped his arm, the sleeve slipping down to hide the skin and his Device again, relieved to let the man openly hear the disgust in his words at last. “And then—and *only* then, by some *incredible* coincidence—did your company decide to show their face. Amazing. Miraculous, actually.” He glared at Kamiya. “Almost like I wasn’t worth your time until there was something to be gained from acknowledging I exist...”

He let the last words hang, let them ring into the quiet of woods. For a long time the pair of them stood some 10 feet apart, Rei working to bring his temper back into check while Kamiya’s face was a grim shadow that darkened his eyes almost to black. The man didn’t meet his gaze, though.

He was staring, instead, at Rei’s arm, taking it in like he couldn’t look away.

After almost a minute, Rei decided it was time to speak again.

“How’d I do?” he got out in a tone of mock-pleasantry. “Did I hit close to the mark, Doc?”

Kamiya started, looking to rise from some deep place with a wince. His jaw tightened, but when he spoke, whatever anger was woven into his words seemed hardly aimed at Rei.

“Jasper had you right from the start,” he got out hoarsely. “It appears I *did* go about things every way but the right one, didn’t I?”

Rei frowned at this, but the doctor was already continuing with another sigh.

“I cannot say you are wrong, Reidon. About any of it. There are some things you have misunderstood, but I can hardly blame you for that given what we—no,” he corrected himself with a real hint of frustration, “given what *I* have put you through.”

“I don’t know about that,” Rei growled, shoving his hands into his pockets in an attempt not to give away the shock of adrenaline the man’s subtle confirmation had brought with it. “It’s been eighteen years. That’s a *lot* of time to have missed seeing *anything* that would suggest I’ve ‘misunderstood’ so much as a minute.”

“Yes. Hence my... irritation...”

Kamiya’s voice was quiet—almost like he hadn’t meant for Rei to overhear him—but there was a resonance within the words that once again took him aback. The surprise was different, this time, though. This wasn’t an odd expression, or a strange look he hadn’t expected. This was... something else.

Power, Rei realized, his eyes dropping immediately to where Kamiya’s own hands—for once—were the ones in fists by his sides.

For the first, he saw the gleam then. The hint of multi-colored steel, black and a deep, blood red.

A Device.

“Wait... You’re a User...?” Rei muttered, unable to keep the astonishment out the question.

It took a second for Kamiya again to rouse from whatever place his thoughts seemed to have taken him, but when he did he looked down. Then, lifting an arm, he too tugged the sleeve of his coat back to reveal the band in truth. Rei wasn’t surprised he hadn’t noticed, then. The vysetrium was usually the thing that stood out, but against the dark steel Kamiya Hiroto’s gems were an onyx-grey, their thin lines seeming almost more intent on sucking the light from their surroundings than they did to shine.

Even Chancery’s true black gems didn’t glow like that...

“Is that so surprising?” the doctor asked. “I would have thought you might expect as much.”

“I didn’t find anything about that.” Rei was studying the CAD with a frown. “It’s not in your bio. Not in your history either...”

“Ah, well... Yes. That’s true.” Kamiya covered the Device again, and his hands returned to their clasped position behind his back as he seemed to regain a little of his composure. “My work... I don’t think you’ll be surprised to know that much of it is classified. Even within the ISCM. For that reason—and my own personal desire—my presence on the feeds is... sterilized, shall we say.”

“Uh huh...” Rei only just heard the man, studying him intently now, taking him in with a different interest. That infallibility. That presence or power... If he had to guess, Kamiya Hiroto wasn’t just *any* User. He didn’t feel like an S but... high As, maybe...?

“I... I did think you were dead, Reidon.”

The statement brought Rei back with the force of a lightning bolt. Immediately he forgot his momentary distraction, the reason why he was there—standing in the woods with a total stranger—snapping back into place all at once.

“... Sorry?” he asked quietly.

“I did—No, rather, to give myself *some* credit—I was *made* to think you were dead.” Kamiya’s face was still grey, but he seemed to be forcing himself to stand straighter, now, forcing himself to stand tall. “You were close with that guess, at least. Very close. However... you are not *my* child.”

Rei could *feel* his heart, now, could feel it hammering against his chest and the blood flowing and drawing from his very fingertips.

“Then... whose am I?” he got out, not so much as hearing the croak in the question.

To be fair, Kamiya’s voice wasn’t much more stable as he answered.

“My son’s. Keiji. I am not your father, Reidon. I am, however...” The man had to pause, clearing his throat before trying again. “I am, however... your grandfather.”

It was like the world itself had forgotten to move. One moment Rei thought his entire body would break apart, would shatter under the nervous, thundering force of

his heart. The next, though, there was nothing. There was only electric emptiness, a numbing buzz that rang in Rei's ears. He didn't feel his own breath come on in uneven, throaty hitches. He didn't feel his school bag slip from his shoulder as his body tensed, nor hear it fall to the frozen stone of the path with a *thud*. There was nothing *to* feel, nothing *to* hear.

There was only Kamiya Hiroto.

His... grandfather...?

"You're... sure?" Rei heard someone gasp weakly through the fog. It took him a second to realize the question had come out in his own quavering voice.

Hiroto's words, on the other hand, reached him like a horn in the night.

"I am. I had Abigail run the test three times. Three different labs. Then I had two more run it without telling her. As you get to know how much faith I have in my steward, I think that will tell you how certain I needed to be."

Rei started returning to himself slowly, his words a little more conscious as the shock drew away little by little.

"But... how? Where would you... How would you get the—?"

"The material? It was provided to us by certain members of the ISCM." Hiroto frowned again, his own voice becoming a little stronger. "There was... incentive applied, I admit. The military keeps a record of the physiological makeup of its assignee hopefuls. The successes and failures alike."

Rei understood. "My Assignment Exam..."

"Indeed. I think you can imagine why it's valuable data to have on hand."

He nodded numbly. Of course it was. If anything, keeping tissue samples and genetic material was probably *invaluable* to the ISCM. It would allow them to compare the physical makeup of failures to successes, the changes over time to their Users, and even the—

Rei wrenched himself back to reality, unwilling to let his tumbling mind flee from the truth that stood before him.

“You’re... my grandfather.” He forced himself to say the words with conviction, like getting them out would make them easier to believe. “I... I’m... *your* kid’s... kid.”

It was Kamiya’s turn to nod, but he did so solemnly.

“You are.” His words were tight again. “Though I admit I have some discomfort claiming that title. Even less calling Keiji your father.”

The anger returned in a flare.

“And why is that?” Rei growled, readying himself for the worst. “Not something you would want publicizing, or are you just—?”

But Kamiya held him up with a raised hand.

“It is nothing of the sort, Reidon,” he said quietly. “My hesitancy comes purely from the fact that my inaction resulted in the life you’ve had until now. That... and the actual *actions* of my son.”

Rei’s mouth fell open then. Not so much due to the doctor’s words, though.

Rather, Rei’s surprise came as Kamiya Hiroto bowed, then. Bowed, with legs straight and body dipping towards the ground, so low that his head fell below the level of his waist. It was a deep, deliberate movement. There was something... sad about it, too. Something heavy. It was... heartfelt, Rei thought?

Heartfelt... and heartbroken.

“I am so sorry, Reidon. Truly. For my failures, and for those of my son.”

Kamiya didn’t lift his head as he spoke, his straight hair hanging down till it nearly touched the ground, his narrow frame—thin but strong for a man his age—unmoving.

It took a long, long time for Rei to find his voice again.

“What... *did* happen?” he asked at last, finally getting out the last question—that last *essential* question—that he had hoped would be heard today.

Before him, the doctor straightened slowly. When he stood tall again, Rei was somehow unsurprised to find the man's eyes redder than they'd been a moment before.

"The details... are not kind, Reidon. Are you sure you want to know?"

Rei hesitated. He hadn't expected to, and it took him aback. Here they were. The answers he needed. He hadn't *wanted* them, somehow. Hadn't for years, now. It had been a long, long time since Rei had come to terms with the bits of his story Matron Kast and the other staff at the Estoran Center on Astra-2 could tell him. It had been a long time since he'd made peace with his last name.

But then Kamiya had come knocking, and the possibility of the truth had been a tempting thing. So tempting, in fact, that he hadn't been able to admit it to himself, much less anyone else.

And yet now... he was hesitating.

For some reason, in that moment, Rei thought of Viv. Aria would have been kind, had she been there to read his thoughts. Aria would have been gentle and encouraging, wanting him to be careful, to be *alright*, no matter what else.

Viv, on the other hand, would have told him to get over himself even as she shoved him across the line with both hands.

Rei could almost feel her standing behind him as he answered.

"Yes. Tell me everything."

Kamiya nodded slowly, like he hadn't expected any other answer even if he'd possibly wished otherwise.

Then he sighed.

"My son is... a difficult man," he started, very clearly choosing his words with care. "A *very* difficult man. It's my fault. His mother—your grandmother, Reidon—died when he was very young. A casualty of that *damn* war." Kamiya grimaced but kept on. "I wish I could say I did my best to raise him but... I do not know if that's truthfully the case, in retrospect. I was absent, I think. Not as absent as some, perhaps, but more

so than I should have been. My work... My work was—*is*—important, you see. At least that was what I told myself at the time.” He snorted, the first true lapse in decorum Rei had seen from the man. “And continue to, apparently.”

Kamiya seemed to ponder that for a moment, frowning up at the sky for a moment before continuing.

“As a result, as I said he grew up to be... selfish. Irresponsible. So much so that I almost feel better about my presence in his life. I truly do not think my not being there is cause enough to have made Keiji the sort of person he is today...” The doctor shook his head. “He’s not incapable. Not in the least. I don’t think you’ll be surprised to know the man who should have been your father is clever and quick-witted. In another life, I would have been proud to call him my son, proud for him to carry on the Kamiya name.”

“But... you’re not?” Rei asked in the brief pause that followed this statement.

Kamiya shook his head, his expression one of barely-suppressed grief.

“No, Reidon... No. It breaks my heart to admit it—and I do not know if I have ever done so out loud—but... no.” He took another slow breath. “Keiji... The money went to his head. Or rather I don’t know if there was ever much else *in* his head. I did not think I indulged him so as a child, but I admit I no longer know *what* to think now, seeing the man he has become. He is...” Kamiya winced. “There is no other word for it, unfortunately: He is a hedonist. Drugs. Debauchery. Expensive experiences and expensive tastes.”

“He sounds like a winner,” Rei muttered through his teeth.

Kamiya nodded, but didn’t answer otherwise. Instead, he grimaced again.

“Regrettably, his antics only got worse when he met Samantha.” He met Rei’s gaze, then. “His wife. The woman who, in turn, should have been your mother.”

An electric shock shivered up Rei's whole body, setting the hairs of his arms stand on end beneath his uniform. His breath caught in his throat, but he swallowed it down this time, unwilling to let his mind rush off into the numbness again.

"Samantha..." he repeated instead, trying out the name.

For some reason, it tasted foul on his tongue.

Not that Kamiya's scowl helped.

"Indeed. It was a 'shotgun' affair, as I believe the old Western adage goes. I'm not even sure where they met. I barely knew they were seeing each other before I learned they'd married. I suppose I should feel lucky they even told me Samantha was pregnant when they did." His anger faded, then, replaced with a somber chagrin. Once more he looked to Rei. "I... was not at your birth, Reidon. A company matter had diverted me—an issue at one of our plants, if I recall correctly—and I convinced myself at the time that there was no need for me to be there. That I could meet you after, and all would be well. That was my single greatest failure in this catastrophe, I think. Had I been there... Had I been *present*..."

Kamiya seemed truly to be struggling with himself now, swallowing with difficulty as a myriad of subtle emotions whispered across his stoic features. Anger. Grief. Shame. Rei even thought detected a hint of hope there, somewhere, but he was too preoccupied to care one way or the other.

"What... What happened?" he asked again instead, finding himself no less hesitant the second time around. Still... he needed to know. Desperately now, more than ever. Had he been unwanted or...

... or had they just thought him broken...?

The answer—in a stroke that was at once merciful and cruel—came brutally.

"To the best of my understanding—and I have few reasons to believe Keiji and Samantha were coy on the subject, this time—your 'parents' couldn't be bothered to do a full gene-panel before your birth." Beneath all the other emotions on the man's

face, the anger was most present now, and his eyes were once more fixed on the arm Rei displayed his scars upon. “They—according to what they told me—‘didn’t see the point.’”

The words hit Rei like kick to the chest.

“They didn’t know about my fibro...” he translated quietly, no longer seeing the old man before him. “And when they found out...”

“And when they found out, they decided they couldn’t be bothered with you *at all.*”

Some part of Rei’s mind registered the kindness Kamiya Hiroto was showing him. It was a small, distant part, but it saw the consideration taken in the bluntness of this answer, in the unvarnished truth handed to him without dance or fanfare. The doctor—his *grandfather*, he recalled with a dim measure of renewed astonishment—was placing his faith in Rei, was trusting that this was the right thing to do. Rei suspected he would appreciate that, soon.

In the moment, though... It just hurt.

It was Rei’s turn to look away for the first time. His gaze drifted from Kamiya to... anywhere. Anything. He looked to the trees, the stone, the sky. I looked to the last drifting hints of the sunlight still casting lines through his breath as it faded behind the skyscrapers of Castalon to the west, then the ever-drifting patterns of the skylanes far above, grown more distinct as the lights of the flyers began to show against the darkening day. He didn’t know what it was he was looking for, unfortunately.

Whatever it was... he was pretty sure he wasn’t going to find it.

“You... said you think they told you the truth ‘this time?’” he asked quietly of the air. “... What does that mean...?”

Kamiya’s voice was a growl as he answered.

“You need not know the details. Let us just say I can be *extremely* persuasive when I set my mind to the—”

“No...” Rei interrupted the man. He could imagine, of course, exactly *how* convincing the doctor could be if he needed to. He himself had stood in front of *plenty* of angry high-level Users when they chose to make the emotions known, after all.

But that wasn't what he'd meant.

“I was... What did you mean by ‘this time?’” he clarified instead. “What did they... The last time, what did they...?”

He couldn't finish the question. A pain had formed in his throat, one that was rising into his cheeks, sharper with every word.

Fortunately, Kamiya had followed his train of thought.

“They told me that you had died, Reidon.” The old man's voice was gentle, a soft whisper that matched the light winter wind that cast its way steadily through the trees in that moment. “In childbirth. They told me you had died. They even...” his voice cracked for a moment. “... They even presented me with an urn, telling me it contained all that remained of my... my grandson.”

The breeze stung. For some reason, as it licked at Rei's face, it stung. Not understanding, he brought a hand up, touching his cheek in confusion.

The tips of his gloved fingers came away damp.

It was long moment before either of them spoke again. It was a difficult silence, heavy and painful as each bore the shared weight of the cruelty that had been thrust upon them. To be fair, Rei wasn't sure he *could* speak even if he'd wanted to, and in that moment he realized he'd made a mistake telling Aria she needn't have come with him.

He would have given anything in that moment—*anything*—to have her there, to have her hand in his, to have her arms wrapped around him and her hair to press his face into as the tears continued to come.

It was Kamiya, this time, who broke the quiet first.

“My next sin I think, was lesser, but no less of a failure...”

Rei blinked at the gravel in the man's voice, coming back to himself. The lump didn't leave his throat, but he wiped at his eyes hurriedly with a sleeve before looking around at the doctor. Kamiya wasn't meeting his gaze again, his face half-turned once more, away from the fading sun this time so that his features were cast in shadow.

"I... couldn't believe them, you see," he continued after a moment. "When they told me you had died. It's something I struggled with for a long time. A *very* long time. I like to think it was the folly of grief, the inability to accept something so terrible but... I now wonder if I've had no faith in my son and his wife for much longer than... than I thought..."

He had to take another slow breath, an unsteady, shaky sound that countered his strong frame.

"I placed calls to the hospital where Keiji told me you'd been born, but I think he and Samantha foresaw that. They told me they hadn't named you, so I had little more than the date of your birth to go on. Worse, what few records I *did* manage to get my hands on all echoed their story. A baby with grey eyes, stillborn and unnamed. It's the primary reason I tested your blood against mine so many times. Money changed hands, you'll be unsurprised to hear. Even in this age of the MIND and all its influences, enough money in the right place can buy almost anything."

"Including falsified birth records..." Rei muttered. He didn't know why he believed Kamiya Hiroto. He probably shouldn't have. For some reason, though, he could help but believe this strange man who claimed to be his grandfather.

Maybe it had something to do with the dim glint of light against the man's own lined cheeks, barely visible against the shadows.

The doctor nodded, then continued. "Just the same, I couldn't let it go. I set a portion of the Corporation's servers to scraping the feeds for signs of you. The only time in my entire adult life I've leveraged the company's assets for my personal gain, at least until recently. A decision I and my foolish pride struggled with for years. *Years.*

Until...” Rei saw the old man swallow with difficulty. “Until... I forgot, Reidon. Until I forgot I had done it, and I forgot... about you.”

The words came hesitantly, painfully. As though he feared saying them allowed.

Rei was discovering, however, that he could not hold onto his anger. Not towards Kamiya Hiroto. Maybe he'd regret that, one day.

But for now... it felt good not to hate *someone*.

“That’s how you found me.” It had been a lesser question, but he was pleased to have the answer all the same. “I figured—if I *was* Kamiya blood—that you’d just been keeping tabs on me in case I *did* prove valuable.”

Before him, Rei thought he saw the doctor’s eyes close briefly, and his whole body seemed to relax ever so slightly.

Relief, Rei recognized.

“Precisely.” The man still didn’t look around at him, but his voice was steadier now. “It happened at the end of your Intra-Schools. Your fight with the Mauler. Logan Grant. Usually qualifying tournaments don’t garner enough attention to have a large presence on the feeds but... well...”

“Yeah...” Rei answered wearily, remembering. “That fight... made the rounds.”

“To put it mildly, yes. At least enough—” Kamiya Hiroto turned to face him at last, and Rei saw in truth the damp trail along the one cheek that face the sun now “—to let me find you.”

Rei was finding it harder to breath than he thought it should have been, but he ignored the discomfort, ignored the tightness in his chest. Instead, he simply stared at the doctor, at the man who was at once a stranger, and yet also the only family he had.

He didn’t know what to make of that.

“So... What now?” he asked after a time, not sure what other questions he could ask.

Kamiya's grim expression tightened ever so slightly, but he straightened his shoulders and lifted his chin, as though reminded of his position and the place to he stood in.

"Now... I make amends, Reidon. Or do the best that I can to. Starting today, right now."

Rei raised and eyebrow at the man. "By throwing money at the problem? By sponsoring me? If you want a headstart on getting to know me, let me save you the—"

"I have already admitted that I went about this in all the wrong ways." Kamiya cut in gently, but firmly, dipping his head in apology once more. "However, I hope you will see this contract not as an attempt to buy my way into your good graces."

"Oh?" Rei snorted doubtfully. "Then how *should* I see it?"

"As a gesture of good faith. As a manifestation of my sincerity. Your sponsorship is not about waving money in your face, Reidon." The doctor shook his head slowly. "It is about providing you with what you need to become everything you can be. It is about..." He swallowed hard again. "It is about... providing you with what your family should have given you from the start."

The pain returned, heavy and sharp in Rei's throat. His hands were fists again, but not in anger this time.

Rather, he held them tight if only to keep them from shaking.

"... Maybe it's better off those two didn't have kids." He said hoarsely, trying at a laugh. "Any brat of *theirs* probably would have ended up pretty messed up, given how they handle shit, huh?"

He had meant it as a joke, had meant it as a strained attempt at levity in a conversation that had at once raised him up and dragged him down, down, down.

He was taken aback—and a little alarmed—therefore, when Kamiya Hiroto's expression shifted briefly to confusion.

Then right on into horrified realization.

“What?” Rei asked, suddenly concerned. “What did I say?”

For the first time, however, the doctor looked truly at a loss for words. His mouth opened, then closed, then opened again.

When he finally spoke, the man sounded almost frightened.

“Ah... Err... Yes, well... About that, Reidon...”

CHAPTER 14

PLACEHOLDER

-PLACEHOLDER

Aria was shivering, but she didn't have the capacity to regret having forgone fetching her jacket and slacks from the East Center's small locker room before rushing out into the cold. It was late—pushing curfew, actually—and she hadn't heard from Rei all evening. Not after dinner. Not after she, Catcher, Chancery, and Logan had headed back to Kanes to drop off their school bags. Not even as their first hour of evening training slipped into two.

And then, just as she'd been thinking of calling it a night—resolving at the same time to bite the bullet and call him when the four of them headed back towards the dorm—he'd messaged her.

Aria had bolted from the training chamber without so much as a word to Catcher or either of the others where she was gone, ignoring their surprised shouts that chased her down the hall.

She was out of the training corridor and in the East Center lobby in a heartbeat. She'd barely managed not to break her nose on the glass of the double doors as they

slid open slower than she would have liked to let her out, and cursed out of habit as the January night—cooled to frigid now that the sun had long since left the sky—bit at the skin of her sweat-slickened arms and legs. Her bare feet were numb in seconds, but she barely noticed them aching as she hugged herself for warmth, looking desperately around. The winter wind was meaner now than it had been all day, and she was forced more than once to pull loose strands of her red hair out of her face while she searched.

Where are you? She thought over and over again, true worry mounting with every passing moment. *Where are you??*

It didn't help that Rei's message played itself on repeat in her head.

Can I see you?

She'd told him where she was, and bolted.

Where are you?? Aria had to keep herself from shouting aloud, squinting into the dark and wind, squeezing herself tighter as the light of the East Center lobby cut a clean, long shadow of herself up the nearest campus path. She wasn't sure why, but Rei's simple question had been heartbreaking. She'd known the meeting was going to be hard, of course she'd known that. No matter how things played out, in *any* of the hundred likely and unlikely directions they could have, she'd known the meeting was going to be hard.

But hours later, for him to be unwilling—or maybe unable—to give her more than that simple question when he reached out...

Yeah, Aria was worried.

That was the moment, mercifully, that she saw him.

"Rei," she breathed before sprinting up the south path.

He loomed out of the night, stepping into the dim glow of one of the overhead lights that illuminated the way in patches of pale white in the dark. He looked... beaten.

Small, almost. His head was bowed and his shoulders hunched, and he was holding onto the loop of his school bag with both hands. As she neared, she saw that his knuckles were white around that strap, like it was some kind of tether holding him wherever it was that he was struggling to be.

He only lifted his face from the path when he heard her running towards him, and without waiting for a greeting Aria barely kept from knocking him clean over as she threw her arms around his neck.

“Aria, it’s *freezing*,” Rei hissed in surprise, his whole body going tense against hers. “What are you *doing*? Where’s your ja—??”

“Doesn’t matter,” she told him quickly, squeezing her eyes shut as she held him tighter. “Doesn’t matter.”

She didn’t say more than that, though, waiting instead for him to speak.

It took some time, but he was warm against her, and everything else was already too cold to cry about. Eventually he seemed to find the will to let go of his bag, and as his arms wrapped around her in turn she managed to stop shivering quite so badly.

“... That was hard...”

His voice was quiet, hoarse and harsh in her ear. She didn’t answer, choosing instead only to nod into his shoulder, encouraging him silently to keep going.

“It’s... what we thought,” he continued after a second, sounding like every word was painful to get out. “At least... sort of.”

“Who was it?” she finally asked, bringing one hand up to the back of his head, pulling him in comfortingly. “Who did you meet?”

“... The CEO,” he answered after a little bit. “Kamiya. Kamiya Hiroto...” Rei paused, and Aria could tell he was working himself up to say more.

It took a full 10 seconds for him to find the courage.

“... My grandfather.”

Aria let in a breath, then, a slow, careful gasp that she had to work hard to keep even. She could feel the pain in her own throat now, but she didn't let it climb.

She could cry later. Right now, it wasn't what he needed.

"Do you want to talk about it?" she whispered instead.

She didn't ask if he was okay. Of course he wasn't. Of *course* he wasn't. It was as they'd feared—and maybe hoped, if only a little bit?

Of course he wasn't okay.

Another nod.

"Yeah..." he got out, sounding like he was working hard to keep his voice steady.

"Yeah. But... inside, okay? Where it's warmer."

"I'm fi—"

"Aria, *I'm* cold, so I sure as hell know *you're* freezing."

She bit back a second protest, but it took a moment for her to find it in herself to let him go. When she did, though, when she finally broke away, she caught Re's face in both hands as they pulled apart, and kissed him. She felt his eyelashes flick against hers when he blinked in surprise, but he didn't fight her. On the contrary his hands, which had start to fall away, dropped instead to her hips, holding her there.

When they *actually* broke apart, she didn't say anything more.

She didn't think she had to.

Much less pleasant than the kiss, on the other hand, was the heat that vanished the moment her body separated from his. She cursed again, then a third time when the wind chose that choice moment to blow with particular vigor, making her wince and shut her eyes against the cold while her arms came up to hug herself once more.

There was rustle of cloth, and before she could even look around something warm and loose fell over her head and shoulders with a comforting weight. Opening her eyes again, she found Rei tugging the hem of his jacket more securely together with one

hand, the other prying one of hers loose to hold it shut. He met her gaze briefly, and the look there—the sad, heavy look—told her not to even think of arguing.

Instead, she let him take her free hand with his own, and together they started back towards the East Center.

They were halfway up the path again when Rei finally started to speak.

“Aria... I’ve got a sister...”

Kamiya Hiroto watched Castalon’s nightlife flash by them without seeing it, his thoughts far away. He didn’t see the neon colors, nor hear the staggered pounding of music from the clubs and dance halls they passed by. He didn’t even notice Abigail’s attentive gaze, trained on him expectantly from her seat opposite him, one leg crossed over the other with fingers wound around her knee.

He was too angry to see the world.

He and Reidon and spoken for hours, neither caring about the descending night more than what it took to look for one of the path lights to stand under as they talked. Hiroto had told the boy a little of his family and the company—of Sarah, of Ueno Jasper’s relationship to him and her services, of the work Kamiya did—but for most of the conversation he had merely listened. Listened as Reidon told him of his life. Some of it he’d already known, but much of it was still new. He’d been aware of the broad strokes. Of the Estoran Center and Grandcrest Preparatory. Of the boy’s diagnosis and the fact that he’d spent much of his life in and out of hospitals. Hiroto had even know how Reidon had struggled to make it onto the combat team at Grandcrest, how he’d scored exceptionally well on the written portion of the Assignment Exam, and had long deduced just how hard he’d pushed himself to rise once he’d made it to Galens.

There had been much though, that he *hadn't* known. Could never have known. Things like the impact of Reidon's first friend. Things like the harassment by his peers, and his constant fight to rise above in whatever way he could, because there had always been so many ways he never would.

Things like the pain...

He could still see Reidon's arm—could still see the scars that lined and decorated the muscled limb—as the boy had held it up for him to take in.

Hiroto didn't feel his hands ball into fists in his lap as the city continued to whirl by in trailing lines of color.

It only took a minute or so more for him to make his decision.

“Abigail.”

“Sir,” the steward answered expectantly, and in the corner of his vision Hiroto saw the woman pull up her frame, ready to take notes.

“How much am I currently sending Keiji and Samantha?”

“About three million credits, sir.”

“A year? That's less than I—”

“A month, sir. Three million a *month*.”

Hiroto grimaced out the window, cursing himself for the thousandth time that evening. *How* he had ever let himself become so *blind*, he would never understand.

Nor, he suspected, forgive himself for.

“I'm almost afraid to ask... Any outstanding debt?”

“There's a gambling sum that has been building on credit using the Kamiya Corporation name, twelve ongoing leases on luxury flyers, four mortgages, and—”

Hiroto brought her up with a hand, working hard not to grind his teeth into pulp. Three million credits a month, and they *still* managed to owe people money. Who needed *twelve* flyers??

He decided quickly.

“Pay of the gambling sum,” Hiroto growled. “Seize any assets purchased using my or the company’s accounts and sell them off. The rest they can deal with on their own.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I also want you to set up a trust. In their names. *Only* their names. Place ten— No—” a vindictive anger flare briefly out of control in his chest. “Place *five* million credits into it.”

Ever the perfect assistant, his steward took this all in stride without showing so much as a hint of surprise. “I’m assuming I should draw the trust funds from your personal accounts, sir?” she asked as she finished taking down the instructions.

“You should.”

“Paying out at a rate of...?”

“Half-a-million a year.”

Abigail nodded, making a note on an invisible keyboard on her knee. “And after that?”

Hiroto could feel Hyosube’s pulse alongside the silent fury of his own heartbeat.

“Cut them off.”

“From everything, sir?”

“From everything.”

Chapter 15

PLACEHOLDER

-PLACEHOLDER

There would come a day, in the not-so-distant future, when Rei would look back on the 48 hours following his meeting with Kamiya Hiroto and realize they might have been among the worst in his life were it not for Aria. Not only did she play goalkeeper

for him when Catcher, Chancery, and Logan all expressed concern after the pair of them returned to East Center—both cold and miserable—but after quietly pushing back on all their questions with assurances they would get an explanation later, she also made sure not to leave his side the rest of the night. It was only the second time she slept over in his room, but there had been moments—while the pair of them stayed up talking in his bed until neither of them could keep their eyes open—that Rei had to pause and take stock of how easy it was, how comfortable. It was a contrast to how the pair of them often were otherwise, tripping over each others sentences and stumbling through their new relationship.

Apparently all we needed was a good old-fashioned crisis, he'd considered as midnight approach, part annoyed, part amused.

The concept wasn't helped when Aria ended up falling asleep first, curled up against him with her head on his chest and the fingers of one hand hooked lightly over his other shoulder.

The following morning only accented this new understanding of his girlfriend's heart further, because Rei was in the process of getting up to his training alarm—groggy and still feeling like a hollowed-out puppet—when Aira took him gently by one scarred wrist and pulled him back under the covers, telling him she'd 'handle it'. He wasn't sure what that meant, but for once needed no coaxing not to get dressed and hit the East Center, tired and miserable as he was. And he *was* tired. *Exhausted* even, and more than just because they'd stayed up late again. Rei was drained, every ounce of energy feeling like it had been siphoned from him by the difficult talk he'd had with the stranger who claimed to be his grandfather. Aria didn't miss that, and the last thing he saw before shutting his eyes again was her pulling up her NOED.

It was a good while later that he woke a second time to her sitting up in bed beside him, one hand stroking his hair gently as she spoke quietly to someone on a call.

Once she hung up, she told him that she'd been talking to Aameena Ashton—having gotten her contact information from Maddison Kent first thing—and that the doctor had “deemed” Rei and Aria both to be “coming down with something” and “better off taking the morning off classes just to be safe.”

“She said she’ll let the instructors know,” Aria told him with a sad little smile, still running her fingers through his white hair. “But she did say she was only writing us off for the morning. Still wants us in afternoon training, sounds like. Thinks it’ll be good for you.”

Rei had been so grateful—and not just a little bit surprised—that he hadn’t even thought to ask what Aria had shared to convince Ashton that he needed some time to himself. Instead, he just looped an arm around her waist and pulled himself over to her across the sheets, burying his face in her shirt as he muttered a low “Thanks.”

Rei didn’t leave the bed all morning other than for the bathroom, and Aria didn’t push him to. She herself only got up once when Catcher had knocked and said through the door that he’d brought them breakfast, and even then she’d only lingered long enough to thank him and promise that yes, they were alright. She must have done *some* explaining of the circumstances at some point, Rei suspected, because Catcher seemed to accept with nothing more than word of understanding and a request to let them know if they needed anything else.

Aria had thanked him, said they were good, and that they’d see him after combat training before she closed the door and returned to bed with what must have been a pound each of buttered toast, bacon, and fresh fruit wrapped in napkins.

Rei had barely eaten, and again Aria hadn’t pushed him to. He’d hardly spoke, too, feeling like he’d run himself dry the night before repeating everything he and Kamiya had talked about, everything about the company, his ‘parents’, and his sister—who the doctor had said was called ‘Sarah’. Aria never tried to coax more out of him than he

was willing to give in the moment, seeming content simply to be there with him, to be by his side while Rei wallowed. It was exactly what he needed.

And the fact that she knew that meant more to Rei than he thought he'd ever be able to articulate.

It was Logan who brought them lunch, and Rei discovered—at the smell of chicken and broccoli—that he'd regained enough of his appetite at some point to bother. Washing down the meal with coffee the Mauler also made them, he found that with the calories—not to mention the much-needed caffeine—also returned a good bit of his absent energy and will, and it was even with some amount of enthusiasm that he followed Aria's lead in taking a quick shower before getting into uniform and grabbing his school bag before heading out of the suite for the first time all day. It was nice out—and probably 20 degrees warmer than it had been the night before—and Rei could feel his spirits lifting a little as he and Aria walked alongside Logan in the direction of the Arena, she not letting go of his hand except for the occasions they crossed paths with a staff officer. He didn't miss her face growing warm under the glances and raised eyebrows of the other students they passed, but still she didn't let go, at times even rubbing the back of his palm with her thumb like she wanted to make sure he remembered that she was there with him. It helped more than she could know, dragging Rei's mind back from thoughts of Kamiya and Central Command and the twisted nature of the 'family' that should have been his.

But not even Aria's hand in his ended up working half so well on his spirits as training.

Though no instructors took them aside this time as the three of them walked out onto the SB3 combat field this time, Ameena Ashton's expertise proved itself once more when the afternoon class proved almost exactly what Rei needed to get his head back on straight, at least mostly. They ran the obstacle course—a rare treat that was among the few breaks from actual fighting the first years ever enjoyed—and the rush

of the hurdles, slants, and shifting hills that careened towards the first years at faster and faster speeds on each of their attempts left Rei no other option but to zone in, to shove away every ounce of distraction—or *any* other thoughts, really—unless he wanted to face-plant right into a wall at 100 miles an hour. And he *did* hit 100, Rei realized with a thrill after his second attempt, and probably well beyond that. In fact, by the end of class he'd roughly timed himself to have lasted at least 2 whole minutes on the course with his best attempt, almost *three times* as long as he remembered making it his very first time on the course the semester before. Best of all, it was a good 15 seconds longer than Emily Gisham—who'd scored second in the group—had made it, and Rei was pretty sure only one or two of the Duelists from Field 4 had managed better in the entire block. He'd grimaced at the intrusive curiosity at how Viv would have done had she been there, choosing instead to salute Bretz and shout a "Thank you, sir!" when the Brawler sub-instructor commended him from the top of the wall overlooking the course he'd just finished.

Then he'd leapt up the 10 feet to join the Second Lieutenant and the rest of the Brawlers—another victory, given he'd always had to take the provided steps up before—accepting a high five and congratulations from both Gisham and Sense before assuming the at-ease position to hear Bretz's feedback.

The stressed exchange of sidelong glances between Camilla Warren and Tad Emble—which Rei pretended he didn't notice—only served as a perfect accent to his improving mood.

At dinner at an hour later, Rei, Aria, and Logan were rejoined by Chancery and Catcher, and Rei's suspicious that Aria had told them—at least in part—about where he'd gone the previous night redouble when everyone was suspiciously careful not to try to engage him on *anything* other than how the obstacle course and gone and the classwork the two of them had missed after skipping class that morning. He even noticed Catcher watching him with some concern a few times, but whenever Rei caught

his eye the Saber would immediately look away or make up some reason to ask him some seemingly-random question. The third time this happened, the poor guy had scrambled so quickly to seem like he *hadn't* been staring that he asked Rei if he could have the rest of his plate of baked salmon despite not yet having touched the hearty pile of fish on his own. Rei didn't mind. He was grateful, actually.

It wasn't easy to admit it, but he just didn't feel up to talking to anyone other than Aria about Kamiya Hiroto and the revelations of the previous night just yet.

Then again, he was reminded later that same evening that the choice was partially out of his hands.

"Come on, Ward!" Catori Imala shouted from behind her red-outlined shield—the only part of her CAD the Lieutenant had bothered to call on for training that night. "You can do better than that! Get through them quicker!"

In answer, Rei grit his teeth and growled out the vocal command for the hundredth time that evening.

"Type Shift: Brawler Mode."

His own shield melted away, and the blade in his right hand vanished in favor of the blue claws that extend from his knuckles as the weight of his armor lessened substantially. He'd been in the middle of trying to sidestep to the left, but with the drastic improvement in his mobility he planted and went right instead, trying to get around Imala's guard. Shido clearly knew what he was trying to do, because instantly a white line extended from his inside hand to the far edge of her shield, indicating the distance between the two. The numbers were becoming more and more useful as he got used to them, and the moment he calculated his own reach would close the gap he made a flashing grab for the corner of the steel. He caught it and hauled on the metal, trying to bring himself around more quickly than the Lieutenant could expect.

Then again, against a User two *full* tiers higher than him, whatever Imala had 'expected' hardly mattered.

“WOAH!” Rei exclaimed as the woman—instead of letting him pull himself around it—wrenched the shield sideways with tremendous force. His grip held despite his weaker Strength spec in Brawler mode, and so Rei was snapped off his feet in a blink. He let go deliberately before Imala could whip the shield back and send him spinning, choosing instead to tuck into a flip and shout “Type Shift: Phalanx Mode!” in mid-air. He landed on his feet, heavily clad once more, and the added weight he was still getting used to nearly had him pinwheeling to keep from losing his balance. He managed it just, and had his defenses in place to accept the sub-instructor’s charge, her shield slamming straight-on into his. She’d been considerate enough to hold back on the hit, of course. *An actually* rush would probably have flattened him against the wall.

A wall three rooms over, he admitted to himself.

“There we go!” the Phalanx sub-instructor praised even as she drove him back. “Good shift in and out! But now what are you gonna d—?”

Clang!

Quick as his limited Speed would allow, Rei pushed away to get a foot or room and dropped his heavy tower shield at Imala’s feet. He doubted the A9 was physically capable of actually tripping up over such a crude trap, but she made a good effort of pretending to have to jump over the sudden obstacle at least. As she did, Rei reached out and once again to grab the woman’s shield—across the top this time—wrenching it towards him. The interest in the Phalanx’s eyes was genuine at least—clearly this wasn’t what she’d expected—but it cleared up as he grunted out the command yet again.

“Type Shift: Saber Mode.”

In a quick ripple of black metal and blue lightning his armor lightened again. The shield on the floor behind Imala whirled out of being back towards him, and the fingers that had been gripping her defenses were suddenly tipped in blue vysetrium, improving his hold substantially. His sword thinned and lengthened, another white line flashing into being to show the distance between its end and the red griffin on the chest of the

sub-instructor's white combat suit. As the Ability finalized the transformation Rei hauled down on the shield and plunged the sword up and over, driving its glowing tip at Imala's heart.

He thought he wasn't even an inch from triggering her reactive shielding when he saw what he thought was a smirk, and the woman's free hand flashed inward.

Then, barehanded, she *caught* the blade.

"*Urk*," Rei grunted in pain and surprise, blindsided when his right shoulder strained in protest as the momentum of his heavy thrust downward was abruptly cut short. Fingers wrapped around the steel and vysetrium edge, Imala held the sword so firmly in place it didn't so much twitch as she continued to rush him back. Rei wrenched at the weapon to no avail, neuroline whirring in his head as his Cognition worked to find an out.

"Type Shift: Bra—!"

WHAM!

In a flash that probably wasn't a quarter of her top speed, the Lieutenant pulled her shield and Rei's sword apart, kicking forward as she did. His arms abruptly hauled to either side, there was nothing he could do when her bare foot took him cleanly in center of the black plating of his chest. There was a *crunch* of metal, and Rei just barely caught the sight of shattered steel trailing his body as he rocketed backwards. He hit the outer wall of the training field at what felt like Mach 2, the invisible barrier rippling briefly under the impact while his sword went whirling away.

Then he fell to his elbows and knees, choking in a broken gasp of a breath.

"The chest," he wheezed into the floor, clutching at his crushed armor with one shaking hand. "Why's it *always* the chest?"

He really should start taking a tally.

“That was better towards the end, Ward. Verbal commands are still the weak link, but even with that disadvantage you’re already moving through your Types a *lot* more cleanly.”

Squinting away the dots that were dancing across his vision under his HUD, Rei looked up to find Imala standing over him, the red outline of what Shido designated an ‘enemy’ now faded to the ‘neutral’ white.

“Yes, ma’am,” he coughed, shoving himself up onto his knees to try to breath a little easier. “Thank you, ma’am.”

“Have you guys started practicing?” Imala’s shield vanished in a whirl as she recalled it silently before offering him a hand up. Behind her, sparks and light flew from where Aria, Catcher, Chancery, and Logan were paired off against Michael Bretz and Claire deSoto on their 2/3^{ds} partition of the field.

“Voiceless commands? No, ma’am,” Rei answered regretfully as he accepted Imala’s help, letting himself get pulled to his feet as the aching in his chest subsided. “It’s been a... weird week.”

The Phalanx frowned, but nodded. “Yeah... Fair enough. I hear Arada’s prognosis is good, though. She’ll be back on her feet before you guys know it, I’m sure. Obviously it’s easier said than done, but you shouldn’t let her situation distract you guys from the prize. Laurent already knows the basics from her summer training. She could at least get you guys rolling.”

Having absolutely *no* desire to clue the Lieutenant into the fact that Viv’s ‘situation’ was now only the lightest of the flaming balls he and Firesong were juggling, Rei didn’t answer.

At least not until the woman reminded him of another he already had in the air.

“Then again, I doubt you guys are going to have much choice for long. We’ll start on them in a soon enough in class, but I doubt your trainers are gonna let you guys go a *day* without putting a hammer to that particular nail.”

Rei blinked at her in confusion, not following for a moment. He must have looked odd, blankly staring through the unmoving visor of black steel and opaque blue vysetrium, because after a second or two Imala raised an eyebrow at him.

And then it hit him.

“Oh *shit*,” he cursed, realizing. “*Monday!*”

“Language, Ward,” Imala warned him with a smirk. “But yes. Monday. This volunteer gig the three of us—” she gestured back at where Bretz and de Soto were still putting a thorough beatdown on the rest of Firesong “—got a bit more complicated when we got *that* news yesterday. Apparently we start *morning* hours next week with you lot. Evenings blocks have been set aside for your *sponsored* trainers. So thanks for that.” She was chuckling, though, watching Rei with interest. “How the hell you managed to pull *that* off... MIND knows. First years with sponsors. Not something you’d hear about when *I* was in school.”

Unfortunately Rei barely heard her, having followed the Phalanx’s hand to look past her at Aria and the others. He hadn’t *forgotten*. Not really. Jasper *had* specifically told him the Kamiya hires would start the coming Monday, after all, and he’d passed the information along to the squad when he’d told them he’d gotten them all sponsored. Still, between Viv and Kamiya, the thing that probably *should* have been at the top of his ‘remember to’ list had fallen a couple slots, resulting in a rush of nerves and anticipation hitting him at Imala’s reminder.

What a weird week it *was* turning out to be...

“Do you know anything about them, ma’am?” he asked, looking back to the Lieutenant. “At all?”

“Apparently no more than you,” the woman answered with a shake of her head. “Sorry, Ward, but details like that are above our pay grade.”

Rei nodded again, disappointed by not surprised, considering. Monday... And Imala and the others were getting nudged to their *morning* extra hours? He’d have to

find a way to thank the three of them for that inconvenience later, but for the time being the thought only brought with it further excitement. The Galens sub-instructors in the morning, the Kamiya trainers at night... Rei wasn't sure how many evenings a week they'd have together, but even 3 or 4 might be *hugely* beneficial if Jasper's promise that the company would only hire the best of the best held true.

Rei shivered at the thoughts, a hint of a grin—probably the first smile he'd managed since the night before—pulling at his face. He had to admit to himself that—while he wasn't anywhere close to trusting the old man—his conversation with Kamiya Hiroto *had* made him feel better about his call to take the contract. Shido's progress had continued to prove itself glacial over the last week—at least in comparison to the growth he'd been seeing before Sectionals—but Jasper was true to her word...

We might just avoid that damn transfer yet... Rei thought with a flicker of hope mixed with a strange combination of dread and excitement.

“Recall,” he muttered out of habit, still lost in thought as he absently watched Logan get sent into the stratosphere by an upward kick from Bretz.

He regretted his distraction almost before Shido had pulled away from his body.

“And who said you could call back your CAD, Cadet??” Imala barked in his face, eyes narrowing. “Did I say were were done?? No I did not! Get that Device back up and get back to the center of the field before I call the Second Lieutenant over here and have him make *you* the ceiling's next decoration!”

Despite Imala's reminder—or more likely *because* of it—Rei felt like the weekend passed at a crawl. The angst he was still feeling whenever the thought of Kamiya Hiroto or his 'parents' or his sister managed to sneak into his head was still very much present, but it was also mixed in now with an excited anticipation shared by the whole of

Firesong. In turn he hadn't waited longer than the walk back to Kane's to tell them of the upcoming change in their schedule, and was only surprised when *Catcher* was the one to look at them all with wide eyes as Aria, Chancery, and Logan each confirmed it had slipped their minds as well in the chaos of the past week.

"You guys *forgot*?" the Saber had demanded, astonished. "Are you *kidding*?? I just thought we weren't taking about it cause it made us all nauseous just thinking about it!" He'd looked around then, perplexed—and maybe a little disappointed—when no one backed him up. "Oh? No? Just me? Faaaaantastic."

To be fair, however, now that it was on his mind again, Rei was indeed in the same camp. He was so distracted in class Saturday morning that he might as well have skipped for a second day in a row. His appetite had returned in force, but he could barely taste his food when they ate, and by Sunday he didn't even remember what they'd done in combat training the afternoon before. He was brought back to earth—rather unfortunately, maybe—when they went and visited Viv again after lunch, finding her much in the same state she'd been the weekend before. Once more it was Liam Gross who escorted them to Altmore, and the Duelist sub-instructor looked no less strained at the sight of his student suspended in her tank, still hooked up to all the same wires and the DTRU that never stopped its thrumming of green light. At the very least they got some good news, this time. It seemed her vitals had been climbing steadily over the course of the week, which had apparently been welcome words to her parents, who'd been by several times to check on her at the invitation of the Institute. Logan—who'd been holding Viv's hand at the time the staffing nurse had share this information—had immediately gone stiff and jerked his attention to the UTU's heavy doors, like he was afraid Mr. and Mrs. Arada would come striding in at any second to demand he unhand their daughter.

Rei didn't have the heart to tell the guy that if they knew *he* was there, it was unlikely they were going to run into the pair while visiting.

After the visit and the quiet flight home, the rest of Sunday afternoon and evening were spent with the five of them taking up both couches and part of the floor of the living area of 304, using the smart-glass back wall to first help Rei and Aria catch up on the last of the classwork they'd missed Friday, then to study various team training exercises and tactics Aria had pulled from the SCT feeds of several professional squads she thought were good parrallel of Firesong. Rei—seated on the ground with his back to his girlfriend's knees for most of the review—didn't miss that every single one of the teams had a Duelist, nor that Aria talked about improving their formations and approaches like Viv was there in the room with them. Nor, he thought, did Logan, who more than once he caught watching Aria with a somber sort gratitude.

Suck it, Martin, Rei hadn't been able to help thinking each time, smiling to himself while Aria absently braided and unbraided his long hair even as she spoke.

The one thing none of them talked about, on the other hand... was the sponsorship.

Monday dawned, and Firesong was even quieter than usual. Even Catcher was subdued, though he made an effort to bring the cheer at breakfast by using his french toast sticks to try and recreate a fight his mom had once had against an S-Rank Phalanx that had—in her own words, apparently—“totally handed her her ass”. Everyone had dutifully laughed along, but that was about all the normalcy any of them seemed to muster for most of the day. In class they were so quiet that John Markus had asked Aria and if something was wrong, followed by Elean Samsus eventually calling her, Rei, and Logan out to answer a question on team positioning on a single-level Zero-Grav field, something she had never had to do before.

Combat training after lunch was much the same, unfortunately. Rei just couldn't get his thoughts in order, and ended up so scatter-brained that he first went to the *wrong* field for cross training, and then managed to annoy Allison Lake when she had to call on him twice to get to his feet and face off with Dekka Abdo. Fortunately Rei won the

match handily—solid Cognition and an increase in respiratory oxygen had a way of lasering you into a fight—and so the Lancer sub-instructor had only a mildly-disappointed glare for him as he'd pulled the Mauler to his feet afterwards.

At least he'd had the presence of mind to meekly apologize before heading back to his circle.

Catcher's words became a premonition by the time class ended. As Aria and Logan joined him again after dismissal, Rei was feeling queasy, distinctly more nervous than he had been since before his first match at Sectionals. Checking to make sure they were good to go, he'd turned and started for the lockers, thinking he might be inclined to forgo the ion showers in favor of a cold version of the real thing, in case it helped settle his stomach.

The sound of their names, shouted from the center of the training floor, smacked that hope away with a newfound wave of nausea.

“Ward! Laurent! Grant! You stay put!”

As one the three all turned away from the hall entrance to find Valera Dent herself striding towards them through the departing students. Saluting the woman, Rei couldn't help but catch Sense's eye as the Brawler passed him with a curious look, but couldn't do more than shrug and pretend he didn't know why he they were being called out before the Captain was standing before them.

She didn't say anything for a minute, waiting for the rest of 1-A to slip by them. More questioning glances from any number of their classmates came, but Rei—like the two beside him—was careful to keep his eyes blankly only on the space over Dent's head as they held their salute.

This wasn't a matter any of them were keen on letting rumors fly about just yet.

As Adam Jax—the last of the stragglers finally hurried by, the captain glanced over her shoulder to make sure they were alone. Sure enough even the sub-instructors—likely at her command—had left, leaving the four standing at the edge of the hall as the

echos of the class' muffled chatter from the distant locker room whispered up the tunnel behind them.

Dent didn't waste any words.

"At ease," she told them firmly, looking between Rei, Aria, and Logan in turn. "You're expected back here at 1900. Catchwick and Cashe as well, obviously. Bring your combat suits. I'll meet you in the lobby of SB6."

"You'll be there, ma'am?" Rei asked, not having expected this. It was a comforting realization to have.

At least until Dent smirked.

"For day one at least, yes. I'll be observing." Then she grinned outright. "Like I'd miss *that* for the world."

And then she was gone, striding by them as Kestrel's bands gleamed around her wrists and the tails of her jacket trailed behind her in her passing.

Dinner could not have been more of an anxious affair, but for once it was noisy again. The five of them seemed to have pushed beyond nerves, beyond anxious anticipation, charging headlong into something between a collective mental breakdown and the kind of resignation one likely experience only with the impending end of the world. Chancery was chattery again—though her voice was several octaves higher than usual—theorizing nonstop about who and what was awaiting them back at the Arena. Logan seemed so keen on not breaking the silverware—again—in his clenched hands that he engaged her almost enthusiastically, talking more in the hour it took them to get through their food than Rei thought he'd ever heard the Mauler say before. Catcher was all strained laughed and rigid smiles, cracking jokes left and right until he seemed to run out of steam and just grinned in a maniacal sort of way down at his dinner. Aria, for her part, seemed to feel the most like Rei, looking a little green despite doing her best to chat with the others, even if she did excuse herself about five times to use the bathroom.

And then, after those several sluggish days, it felt like a blink before they were climbing the entrance stairs of the Arena once more.

“Oh maaan...” Catcher could be heard mumbling to himself as they reached the landing of the main floor and the warmth of the interior. “Oh man oh man oh man oh—”

“*Catcher.*” Chancery cut him off firmly, sounding like she was having a hard time forming the words. “My man. My dude. Please. For the love of the *MIND*. Shut. *Up.*”

For once Rei had to agree with her, wondering privately whether the building had already been sterilized for the night or if anyone the next day would ever know if he vomiting over the railing to their left.

“SB6, Dent said?” Aria asked as they turned down the stairs to the underworks. Rei suspected the question was more just to have something to say than actually needing to know the answer.

Logan was apparently right there with her.

“SB6,” he confirmed in a grunt. “Never been down that far.”

“I have,” Catcher managed to get out almost normally. “de Soto takes us on occasion. Standard Arena setup. Wargames area, two Team Battle fields, two Dueling.”

“Interesting,” Rei added even though it wasn’t *remotely* interesting, and he immediately wished he hadn’t. Apparently unlike the others, his stomach told him keeping his mouth *shut* was the single best thing he could do for the time being.

They made it to the elevator lobby without anyone hyperventilating, and Chancery called them a car. A minute later they were on their way down, and with every passing floor Rei’s nervous seemed to redouble. Catcher was outright bouncing now as they watched the numbers change on the wall, and Logan’s hands were brick-sized fists in his pockets while his red-black eyes appeared to be staring at nothing.

Then they reached SB6 with a quiet *ting*, and Rei swallowed as the doors opened before them.

“Move it, Firesong. I would *not* suggest being late to meet our new guests.”

As promised, Dent was waiting for them in her black and golds, standing in the middle of the elevator lobby with arms crossed. She was smirking again as they all filed out of the car, and Rei couldn't help but notice something a little strange in that smile. At first Rei only stressed further, thinking the captain looked strained, but after a second he had to blink in surprise as he realized it was something else entirely.

Dent, if anything, looked like she was trying to hide an excitement that had to match their own.

“Ya'll got your heads on straight?” she asked, the fingers of one hand drumming at the sleeve of her other arm.

To their collective credit, Rei thought their salutes and answering “Yes, ma'am!” were only a little shakier than usual.

The captain nodded in approval, and said nothing more for a moment. Then, just as Aria opened her mouth beside Rei—probably to ask if they should get changed or not—Dent uncrossed her arms and planted her hands on her hips before letting out a breath of what sounded like pure disbelief.

“Haaaa...” she intoned, dropping her head to shake it with eyes on of the floor. Before Firesong could do more than glance among themselves in concern, though, she looked up to stare right at Rei, eyebrows so high over the line of her facial prosthetic that they were almost hidden under her cap. “The hell did you get your team mixed up with, Ward?”

This did absolutely *nothing*, of course, to help anyone's anxiety.

“M-ma'am?” Aria started nervously, still saluting. “Is everything alr—?”

“Oh yeah. Everything fine, Laurent,” Dent assured her quickly, straightening up and lifting a hand from one hip to wave the concern away. “Ignore that. Just... A little shook, is all.”

“Shook?” Chancery squeaked from behind Rei.

In answer, the captain's grinned only widened.

"Yup. Apparently your sponsor doesn't mess around, Firesong." Then her expression flattened, returning the baser affect of an officer of the ISCM. "You'll see. Now go get changed. We'll meet you on the training floor."

And with that she turned and strode away with a whirl up the right side of the hall, leaving the five staring after her, collectively unsure whether to be elated or terrified.

"... I think I'm gonna be sick," Logan muttered at last, breaking the quiet after almost 10 seconds of solid silence between them

"Yeah... you and me both, man," Aria managed, starting—if a little uncertainly—off in the direction Dent had gone. "Let's... let's move, squad."

The others followed in a staggered fashion, each just as unsteady on their feet, with Chancery only getting going when Catcher gently nudged her from what seemed to have been a state of shock with a low "Come on..."

As it turned out there was no collegiate locker room on sub-basement 6, so after a minute of searching in vane Aria made the call to lead them through one of the smaller sliding doors of the professional accommodations. As it opened, Rei instantly suspected this had to be the "Green" room, assuming Galen's standard naming conventions held up throughout the various SB levels. The floors and walls were all emerald tile of different shades and shapes, with everything accented in black all the way down to the dark crystal of the long pair of strung chandeliers that hung from the ceiling some 20 feet above them. Unlike in the Black room there was no fish tank in this chamber, but after they'd turned down the double aisle of lockers Chancery squawked and nearly jumped out of her skin when she caught sight of the two tall, double-wide terrariums that split the rows opposite one another. From inside each, a pair of massive green snakes were watching the five of them with black eyes the size of marbles, coiled up contently on matching, heavy tree branches under a warm light emanating from the tops of the tanks. Any other time, Rei thought he might have enjoyed stopping to study

the animals, the exotic sort that weren't easily found on terraformed planets like Astra-3.

Instead, no one did more than glance into the terrariums, with only Chancery muttering something about heart attacks, blood pressure, and how the day was out to kill her from the locker furthest for either of the snakes.

In that near-silence they once more all changed out of their uniforms and slipped quickly into the red-on-grey combat suits. Once everyone was all set, Aria led them back out into the hall, turning right to march stiffly towards the great entrance that would lead them onto the sub-basement combat field. As they approached, Rei noticed he could hear voices, and he felt his own heartbeat quicken with every step they took.

Calm, he had to tell himself, taking a breath and working to keep his chin up. *Be calm.*

They reached the opening, and turned onto the training field. The overhead lights were bright compared to the dimmer illumination of the hall, so it took Rei a second for his eyes to adjust. Once they did, he immediately made out a group of people waiting just off the center of the wide floor, standing in a loose circle, all deep in discussion. Four of them Rei knew at once. Valera Dent was obvious even on the far side of the group, and none other than Rama Guest and Maddison Kent stood to her left, the colonel in his own black and golds, his blonde assistant in a handsome blue pantsuit and black heels. To this pair's left, a lithe figure stood dressed in a trim, form-fitting grey-green dress and a matching handbag. The woman's nails were done in the same green, and her straight black hair had been pinned up into a bun by a decorative onyx comb.

Rei was somehow unsurprised when Ueno Jasper was the first to notice Firesong arrive, the fixer's eyes seemingly on them before the five had all even made it around the corner.

Some shift in her posture, however, clearly caught the attention of the other three members of the group, all of whom had been standing with their backs to the entrance. As one they stopped talking and look around. They were each dressed in the black combat suits of the ISCM proper, the military's crossed swords and seven stars emblazoned in gold over the dark, form-fitting fabric. The youngest of them—a tall, red-headed man who looked to be in his mid-20s—stood to the left of a mismatched pair of women, the first—in the middle—much older than the other. As the trio half turned to watch Firesong approach, Rei couldn't help but frown, feeling like he should recognize all three of—

And then he stopped dead in his tracks, jaw dropping right to the floor.

He wasn't the only, either. Behind him Catcher and Logan both cursed in matching shock. Chancery—either out of her own astonished or just because everyone else had stopped—sounded to have halted silently beside them. To his right, even Aria had come up short, her whole body going stiff. At first Rei thought she was rooted in place for the same reason he and at least Catcher and Logan were, all three boys staring in shock at the middle of the trio of figures before them. The old woman—who he knew now was in her 70s at *least*—was sharp-eyed despite the stoop her her back, taking them in with an appraising gaze and a knowing half-smile.

“No way...” Rei didn't even hear himself croak. “No. *Way*...”

Behind him, Catcher and Logan echoed the sentiment, and Rei started to look around at them, feeling like he needed a verbal confirmation that what he was seeing was real.

But then Aria made a sound, a choked, disbelieve gulp of noise that had Rei's eyes stopping instead on her. To his initial surprise he found his girlfriend gaping not at the woman, but instead at the *man* standing next to her. The red-headed man.

The red-headed, *green-eyed* man who was in the process of grinning guiltily and raising a hand in meek hello.

A second shock of realization rocked Rei's body, understanding dawning even as Aria's question came in a hiss of disbelief.

"... *Kalus??*"

"Yo, sis," Kalus Laurent, S-Ranked Pawn-Class and rising star of the Intersystem SCTs, greeted Aria sheepishly. "Uh... Fancy seeing you here?"

CHAPTER 16

About 10 seconds earlier, Rei would have bet the world that *nothing* was going to be able to distract him from his recognition of the old woman standing in the middle of who he knew had to be the not one, not two, but *three* top-class trainers the Kamiya Corporation had gathered together for him and Firesong. It was *stupid* that she was there, after all. It was beyond any reason or logic, and in any other moment Rei was positive absolute nothing in the entirety of the known universe or beyond could have kept him from mouthing at the air in shock while he stared.

As it turned out, unexpectedly coming face to face with Aria's older brother—Aria's S-Ranked, *extremely powerful* older brother—was enough to do the trick.

Rei felt his face warm, his mind suddenly scrambling to clear itself of his jumbled astonishment and emotions. Meeting *Carmen* Laurent—Aria's father—had been bad enough, but at least he'd had a minute or so to gather himself before *that* particular encounter. This, somehow, was worse—*way* worse—not the least because Rei knew Aria was still close to her brother and sister in a way she wasn't with her parents.

He wasn't sure he'd ever felt more at a tumbling loss than in that moment, standing before this particular gathering of incredible Users that should be *all means* have had I'm totally enamored, while his top worries were instead hovering between regretting how long it had been since he'd gotten a haircut and hoping he was standing straight enough to make a good impression.

His trepidation clearly wasn't missed, either, because he went stiff as Kalus Laurent's attention flicked briefly to him, lingering just long enough to feel—if only in Rei's own head—like an appraisal.

Luckily, that was the moment Aria managed to find her tongue again, having been standing for a good several seconds staring in disbelief at her brother.

“Kalus, what are you *doing* here?” she asked, taking a tentative step forward, like she wasn't sure whether she wanted to rush the man and hug him or stay professionally put.

Fair dilemma given present company, Rei thought weakly.

“That—” Kalus told her, not moving from his place as he glanced sidelong at the two women next to him “—is... a story. Probably one for later. But as you can see—” he gestured down at his combat suit, the pale green vysetrium of his CAD bands gleaming against red and black steel “—I'm here on... err... a job.” His sheepish grin grew a bit more roguish, and his eyes flicked to Rei again. “Well that... and obviously I was pretty keen on meeting the guy a certain *someone* can't seem to shut up about every time we chat.”

Rei's cheeks only burned hotter, and Aria's one ear that he could see turned almost the color of her hair.

Mercifully, that was when the last of the strangers decided to interrupt them with a cackle of laughter.

“Holy hell, look at their *faces*.” The woman—probably in her late 20s with brown-streaked grey hair and matching eyes—guffawed in a carrying voice that was in total opposition to her tanned, slender frame. “Kalus, you couldn't ease into it? You're gonna put the poor kids in therapy!”

In answer, Kalus Laurent scowled around at the woman. He was of a height with her, maybe 6'3" or so, but with wider shoulders and more muscle on his arms. Shaken a little out of his shock, Rei was also able to see that—while the man's eyes matched

his sisters pretty much to a T—his long hair—straight and reaching just past his shoulders—was darker than Aria’s, of a color more like the burgundy Rei recalled their father sported in his own.

The reminder of this familia tie did absolutely *nothing* to help his heart rate.

“And what was I *supposed* to do, Jay?” Laurent grumbled. “Make a sign? ‘Hello, boyfriend! I come in peace!’? Just how much of a weirdo do you think I am?”

“No comment,” Jay—who’s name clicked recognition into place in time to send Rei into yet *another* tailspin—answered with her hands on her hips, sticking her tongue out at the man. “I’m just saying maaaybe a heads up would have been nice.”

Laurent grit his teeth, clearly frustrated. “I *couldn’t* do that and you damn well *know* it. Or were you *not* under the same gag order as—?”

“That’s quite enough, I think.”

The interruption was smooth and polite, but as unyielding as iron. Aria’s brother stopped talking immediately, and Jay—Jay ‘Jetway’ Wainwright, Rei knew now—snapped up straight and at ease. The instantaneous response was completely understandable, of course.

What else were you supposed to do when someone who could probably *sneeze* you through a steel wall told you to get it together?

There was a second of silence as the gaze of the speaker slid slowly first from Laurent to Wainwright, then back again, the gentle warning clear. The woman might have been tall once—maybe nearly as tall of either of the pair, Rei guessed—but time appeared to have taken its toll on her in the way it came for all eventually. She stooped slightly, both hands resting on atop the other on the plain wooden cane she was leaning into. Her hair—braided into a flat plate behind her head—seemed to have been allowed to get naturally grey, and her face was worn with age, wrinkles and line matching the mottled skin of her bare limbs. By all rights the woman should have looked out of place in her black combat suit, old as she appeared.

Instead, Rei wasn't sure even *Carmen Laurent* had possessed such an imposing a presence.

Under the loosening skin of the old woman's arms and legs, the shape of well-formed muscle could still be made out, nearly as prominent as the lean cut of Wainwright's own toned figure. Her CAD bands—those famous loops of clean white and gold—shown in the subbasement lighting with every promise of dangerous power. Even the woman's stoop was too strong, too certain, like a trap set for anyone to dare question it. Her eyes, too, were too set, still and confident in an absolute sort of way, a gaze of black filled with speckled gold that was as certain as the force of gravity itself. Looking at the woman, Rei couldn't help but be reminded of stories he'd read of the old gods of ancient Earth who would grown bored and descend from their grand halls to walk among the mortals. *That* was he felt, he decided, then.

Standing before Serena von Bor—Rook-Class S-Rank, and Galens' most famous graduate after the Gatecrusher himself—was like having a audience with a deity who'd chosen, for whatever reason, to disguise themselves as something less than what they were.

And then, all of a sudden, those dark eyes were on him.

“Hello, Firesong.” von Bor's voice—in contrast to the sheer weight of her presence—was kindly, almost soothing, and matched by a smile accented with a firm sort of warmth. “By the look on your faces I'm assuming at least a few of you already know who one or two of us are?”

Rei knew he wasn't the only one to nod numbly, and Catcher saved anyone who *wasn't* aware by getting the name out in a rasp of disbelief.

“The Ivory Shield. You're... You're the Ivory Shield.”

von Bor's smile widen ever so slightly, and she dipped her wizened head in acknowledgement. “Bonus points for the Arena name, Mr. Catchwick. Not that I'm surprised. The Kamiya Corporation *was* thorough in the profiles we were provided. And

speaking of...” She glanced over her shoulder expectantly. “Ms. Ueno. Perhaps you’d like to get started with introductions?”

If Jasper was at all intimidated to have the Rook-Class address her so directly, the fixer didn’t show it. On the contrary, the handsome woman smiled like she couldn’t have been more delighted, clapping her manicured hands together enthusiastically and stepping forward.

“Of course! We *should* get things moving, shouldn’t we?” Moving up to stand between von Bor and Wainwright, she gestured for Rei and the others to approach. “Firesong, let’s go. I promise no one here is going to bite you.”

“Like we could stop them if they wanted to...” Rei heard Logan grunt, still sounding stunned.

They did as they were told, however, Aria leading them forward as steadily as she could, even if Rei was pretty sure she still barely ever took her eyes off her brother. Soon they were standing before the seven adults in the standard triangle presentation of a ISCM squad, Viv’s absence made extra conspicuous in the gap in the formation at Rei’s right. Even Jasper’s eyes lingered on this empty space for a second before she started speaking like nothing in the world was odd about the current situation.

“For those of you who don’t know me, my name is Ueno Jasper.” The woman’s smile was dazzling, her light accent warm and endearing in a way that only made Rei wary. “I’ve been retained by your sponsor to organize the training program agreed-upon in the partnership Mr. Ward here was gracious enough to recently enter into with my employer, the broad details of which I believe you’re now all aware of.”

In front of Rei, he thought he saw Aria’s gaze finally tear away from her brother at this introduction, and she let out a quiet “Oh” of recognition at the name.

Jasper’s smile brightened ever so slightly, but she continued like she hadn’t heard.

“As Captain von Bor said, clearly most of you are indeed already familiar with one or two members of your training team—” her vibrant blue eyes gleamed with

amusement as they flicked briefly to Laurent “—but it never hurts to make proper introduction. Firstly, may I present Sergeant Major Kalus Laurent.” She gestured towards the young man, whose smile was nervous as he obviously did his level best to avoid the stare Aria had returned to him. “While he has no Arena name as of yet, we are all sure it’s only a matter of time. He is an S-Ranked Pawn-Class, and—” Jasper winked knowingly at Rei “—he happens to be an Atypical.”

“Wait... *Laur*—?” Chancery started in surprise.

“Cadet Cashe, you will hold your questions until such time as you are given leave to present them, if you please.”

It was Colonel Guest who spoke, standing with his hands clasped at his back behind Jasper, von Bor, and the others. At his sides, Dent and Maddison Kent were equally still-faced, though Rei thought he could make out a sharp gleam of matching interest in both their watchful study of the exchange.

“Not to worry, not to worry,” Jasper said placatingly, smiling over Rei’s shoulder at Chancery. “Yes, the sergeant major *is* indeed the brother of Ms. Laurent here, Ms. Cashe. If you have any concerns about that, however, I have *every* assurance from the sergeant major that he will have absolutely *no* issue providing you the highest quality training despite that fact.”

“Not what surprised me...” Rei barely heard Chancery mutter in answer, the words fortunately low enough not to be made out by anyone else this time.

“On our other side—” Jasper continued, gesturing over von Bor to the where Wainwright was grinning broadly even as she continued to stand at ease. “Is Second Lieutenant Jayden Wainwright, though if you already know her it may be as ‘Jetway’.”

“They better,” the tall woman added with another bark of laughter. “I worked my ass off to get that name!”

“As you may be aware, the second lieutenant’s squad has qualified for Intersystems every season for the last several years. Like Sergeant Major Laurent, she is a Pawn-

Class.” Jasper’s gaze was a bit more intentional as it fell momentarily on Rei again. “She is considered one of the strongest up-and-coming Lancers in the professional SCT circuits, and the Kamiya Corporation felt her expertise might be of particular value given the... particular circumstances of your squad.”

It didn’t take much for Rei to read between the lines. On the surface he supposed Jasper could be talking about the fact that Firesong had two spear-wielders, and Kamiya was taking its promise to train the *whole* team—not just him—seriously. It was possible, of course. Even likely, at least in part.

But that didn’t mean the other implication—that Kamiya was considering the future of Rei and Shido’s own special kind of growth—wasn’t present too.

“Lastly, I of *course* have to properly introduce to you to your lead trainer.” Jasper had moved on without pause, smiling even more widely as she gestured to von Bor with both hands, her whole body bowing slightly in the woman’s direction as though in respect. “May I present Captain Serena von Bor, Rook-Class Phalanx. As I’m sure you are aware, Captain von Bor happens to be a Galens graduate, and has an *extensive* list of accolades to her credit. Mr. Catchwick has already been kind enough to give us her Arena name.” Jasper winked at them all. “She best known, perhaps, as a former Dueling Champion of the Sol System SCT’s, a title very few User have the opportunity to claim.”

“Bah,” von Bor snorted, banging her cane lightly against the steel of the projection plating beneath her feet. “The same can be said for *any* system tournament, Ms. Ueno.”

A half-truth, Rei knew, his attention finally focused on the Ivory Shield. Sure, it was *technically* accurate that there were no less Systems champions in the likes of Astra than Sol, but the two hardly compared. Sol wasn’t just the heart of the ISC—and therefore the ISCM. It had Earth and Mars, and was therefore the home of nearly *every* top military academy in the Collective. Annapolis. LMA. The 1st Military College. Even *Venus*—known better for its resorts—had the 1st Sector Division, which boasted a couple collegiate and professional Intersystem champs each in the last 50 years. In fact,

statistically Rei was pretty sure the Sol System Champion went on to win the *Intersystem* title something like... was it 38% of the time?

Needless to say, it was indeed an accolade worth the awe he could literally *feel* resonating from Catcher and Logan at his back.

Jasper—as ever—seemed to read his mind.

“You are too humble, Captain,” the woman answered von Bor with another diplomatic little bow. “That said, knowing what I do of this squad, I have to say your modesty is likely to fall on deaf ears. It’s my understanding—” she shot Firesong a look gleaming with wicked amusement “—that if nothing else Reidon, Mr. Catchwick, and Mr. Grant at least are very likely to have your tournament history already committed to memory, so it will only do so much to—Oh? Yes, Ms. Laurent?”

To Rei’s surprise, Aria had indeed raised a nervous hand, intruding on Jasper’s flattery.

“Uh...” she started uncertainly. “Me... Me, too, ma’am...” She hadn’t lost an ounce of the flush Kalus’ earlier teasing had brought on, and seemed only the more lost for words because of it. “I... uh... I know it... too...”

Jasper’s smile could have swallowed her whole, and Rei didn’t for a *moment* think the fixer hadn’t anticipated the potential of such an interruption.

“But of *course*, dear,” she crooned sweetly, stepping forward to stand between Aria and von Bor. “How *could* I have assumed otherwise, given your ‘Type?’” She turned her attention to the three S-Ranks, then. “A perfect transition, I believe. Sergeant Major, Lieutenant, Captain. May I present to you Aria Laurent, C8 Phalanx and squad leader of Firesong.” She gestured to Aria, then behind her. “Viviana Arada, the team’s C? Duelist, is unfortunately indisposed, but along the back you will find Logan Grant, C? Mauler, Chancery Cashe, C? Lancer, and Layton Catchwick, C? Saber—who prefers ‘Catcher’, if you like to be a little less formal with your trainees.” Then, lastly, she

indicated Rei. “Lastly, of course, is Reidon Ward, C9 Atypical and our...” Jasper paused, seeming to choose her words carefully “...resident oddity, shall we say.”

Rei didn’t know whether to glare or roll his eyes.

“S’pose that’s one way to put it,” Wainwright chuckled, her nonchalant eyeing of Rei not entirely hiding a sharp, quick study of him. “You’re taller than I heard, Ward. That CAD of yours really *is* wicked piece of tech, isn’t it?”

Rei, luckily, had finally managed to get his heart rate under control. Standing a little straighter, he kept his eyes over the Lieutenant’s shoulder as he answered.

“It’s worked for me so far, ma’am.”

“Yeah... Damn right it has...” Wainwright grunted in answer, continuing to eye him with interest.

It was von Bor, however, that took up the conversation from there.

“Thank you, Ms. Ueno.” The old woman dipped her head towards the fixer. “That was most... thorough.”

Jasper must have heard the polite dismissal in the words, because she bowed out of the way to stand a little to the side.

Not before throwing another wink at Rei, of course, bringing on a his sudden desire to sigh.

“You’ll find I’m not one for much idle chit-chat, Firesong.” The Ivory Shield dove right in, dark gaze sweeping over the squad. “It *is* unfortunate that Cadet Arada is currently unable to join us, but just the same I see no reason for that to delay anything.” She banged her cane again, eyes lingering on Rei for a moment before moving to settle on Aria. “As Ms. Ueno has stated, I have the pleasure of having been assigned the opportunity to be your lead trainer for this little journey of ours. As such, I will be expecting the same degree of commitment and resolve from you as Captain Dent and Colonel Guest have just spent the last twenty minutes ensuring us your team is known for. I’m assuming that won’t be an issue.”

Not a question so much as a statement, but Rei was pleased to realize he hardly alone in having shaken most of the initial shock of their meeting

“Yes, ma’am!” five voices answered in unison.

“Excellent.” von Bor’s smiled slightly, still watching Aria. “With that in mind, let us clear the air a little, shall we?”

Rei barely stopped himself from frowning at that, his gaze dropping for the briefest second to the woman’s lined face. ‘Clear the air’?

Obviously he wasn’t the only one taken by surprise either, because for the first time since he’d met the woman, Ueno Jasper looked suddenly just the tiniest bit disconcerted.

“Captain?” she interjected sweetly. “I was under the impression you were eager to get started with—”

“Oh we are, Ms. Ueno,” von Bor cut the woman off without looking at her. “All of us here, I imagine. Still, you’ll excuse this old bag of bones for not having much patience for elephants taking up all the air in the room.”

Jasper’s smile faded ever so slightly.

“Captain, I think it might be best if—”

The Ivory Shield spoke over her like she hadn’t heard a thing.

“On paper the Kamiya Corporation has enlisted the three of us here to train you, Firesong. To train *all* of you to the greatest of our ability, to squeeze out every ounce of talent and potential we can from your meek little bodies. We intend to do just that” Another bang of the cane. “However... I’ve read your files. Not a one of you is anything *close* to stupid, and I therefore am going to choose to believe that not one of you is prone to delusion. For that reason, I will make the assumption that each of you is already aware of what our dear employer is *actually* after. The *only* thing they are actually after.”

To her credit, Jasper's perfectly composed features didn't so much as flinch. On the contrary, still standing off to the side she looked on with something like polite interest, her smile returned to its usual brightness and her attention sharp as she took in Serena von Bor like there was no greater pleasure than hearing the captain speak.

Rei could practically see her reassessing the woman before his very eyes.

"Why are we here, Firesong?" the Ivory Shield asked of the squad. "Tell me. The sergeant major, second lieutenant, and myself. Why are we *actually* here?"

There was a moment of silence, and Rei wished for the hundredth time that Viv was there, so he could trade a look with her. As it was, he was instead only able to imagine Chancery nervously chewing on her lip behind him while Catcher and Logan fought themselves not to glance worriedly at each other.

Aria, of course, had it the worst, taking the brunt of the old woman's gaze head on.

Then again, she'd always been damn good under pressure.

"Cadet Ward, ma'am."

Aria's answer wasn't exactly confident, but it wasn't lacking in certainty. Indeed, Rei watched his girlfriend stand a little straighter as she spoke, chin lifting as her green eyes continued to stare over von Bor's head.

"Indeed." The Ivory Shield nodded, smiling a little wider, obviously pleased by the curt honesty. "That *is* the reality of this moment, Cadet Laurent, isn't it?"

Then, at last, her dark gaze moved from Aria to take in the others in quick succession.

Everyone other than Rei.

"Standing before you are not one, not two, but *three* S-Ranked CAD-Users, two of whom have taken valuable time out of their own active training for the professional circuits to provide you this opportunity, and one of them a *highly* sought after Atypical who could probably peddle his services for any price he saw fit given the rare nature of

his success as an A-Type. As for me...” von Bor’s eyes were unwavering orbs of black as she looked from Logan to Catcher to Chancery, “I may be retired, but I don’t imagine you’re fool enough to think *my* time isn’t of particular value also. Yes, the Kamiya Corporation offered me the moon, and yes, there’s a certain nostalgic pleasure at being back under the roof of my alma mater.” She lifted a gnarled hand briefly to indicate the subbasement with a wave. “However... At the end of the day, I am standing in front of five *first-year* Cadets—not even a complete *squad*—pledging my time to you. It is unprecedented, and the feeds will have an absolute field day when they catch wind of this. And for now I am standing here for no other reason—” she lifted her cane to jab it in Rei’s direction “—but him.” Her eyes settled on him, this time, and Rei’s face—having already grown hotter with every passing word—burned.

Still, it wasn’t him she addressed with her next question.

“Would you agree that’s a fact, sq—?”

She didn’t even get to finish.

“No.”

It was Aria again who answered, and this time her response was as steely as Rei had ever heard.

“*Cadet* Laurent...” Captain Dent growled out a warning from behind von Bor and the others, though Rei thought there might have been a hint—just a hint—of amusement in the Bishop’s tone.

“No... *ma’am*,” Aria corrected through gritted teeth. “Sorry, *ma’am*.”

von Bor, however, hardly looked annoyed at having been interrupted. If anything, Rei thought—braving a glance down at the old woman—that she almost looked rather...

Pleased? he thought, surprised.

“That a fact, Laurent?” It was Wainwright who stepped in. “I know *I* took this job cause of Cadet Ward over there.” She jerked her chin at Rei without looking away from Aria. “You telling me there’s more of interest here than him?”

“There is, ma’am.”

“You ready to prove that?” The S-Ranked Lancer didn’t wait for an response from her, lifting her gaze instead to the squad’s back row. “*All* of you ready to prove that?”

“Can they?” It was Kalus Laurent’s turn to step in, his own green eyes also sweeping across Catcher, Logan, and Chancery. “Baby sis here is one thing. C8 superstar who’s out to make me look bad before she even graduates. Don’t know about the rest of ‘em.”

“We can, sir.” Logan’s voice was firm, etched with only the barest hint of anger.

“Definitely.” Catcher’s assurance, on the other hand was level.

Rei suspected the Saber, like him, had started to catch on to the game their new instructors were playing.

Unbeknownst to any of them, training had already started.

“Yeah... We’ll see about that...” Laurent’s gaze flicked only briefly from Catcher to Rei, then moved to Chancery. “What about you, Cashe? Haven’t heard you say if—”

“All due respect, sir: Put us on a field and we’ll show you.”

The Lancer’s barbed words rang clear, and for a second Kalus Laurent looked surprised.

Then he and Wainwright both laughed, and between them von Bor’s smile too, broadened.

“Ah...” the Ivory Shield said with a chuckle. “And we thought you’d never ask.”

And then, with one final bang from her cane, blue flashed across the captains black eyes, and Rei felt the field under his bare feet begin to change.

If nothing else Firesong started on the right foot, with only Aria being faster than Rei on the uptake after everyone got out an “Oh!” or “What the—?!” of surprise.

“Woodlands!” she called out the moment what could only be grass and trees began to rise up between the squad and the three trainers, quickly blocking them, Jasper, Dent, Guest, and Maddison Kent from view. “The second we start, form up! I want a *mobile* defense. I’m front, Rei’s left, Chancery’s right. Catcher, Logan, you’ve got our six.”

“Roger that,” all of them said together while the five of them climbed.

“I’m assuming we’re going hunting?” Rei asked as a blink in his frame told him that combat coms had come online online.

“I would vote ‘yay’ on that, if anyone cares about my opinion.”

Communications had popped in right no time, because Catcher’s hopeful offer was abruptly hard to make out when the field started to form a stormy sky over their heads, a mean wind suddenly buffeting them just as they’re ascent slowed, then ceased.

“Seconded,” Logan muttered, stepping up to stand beside Rei and peering up at the clouds. “Especially if—Well, there you go.”

“Ah man... Did you *have* to jinx it?” Chancery this time, moving forward too as the first heavy drops of rain started to fall.

Not 3 seconds later later, they were all standing in an ugly downpour, everyone one of them almost instantly soaked from head to toe.

“Storm’s good for us.” Aria’s voice was clear in their ears even over the rain. “Anything to help close the advantage gap.”

They all agreed, either with a nodded of grunt of affirmation. None of them, Rei noted with measured amusement, decided to voice the fact that nothing short of a tactical nuke would *actually* close said gap, given who they were up again.

“Which way we moving on go?” he asked instead, lifting both scared hands to shield his face as he attempted to squint through the storm.

“South.” Aria’s answer was accompanied by a gleam of Hippolyta’s green vysetrium when she lifted a hand to point to their left. “Kalus was on von Bor’s right, meaning if they split there’s a decent chance he’ll go that way. He’s the least experienced of the three, so we’ve got the best chance of making a match of it against him.”

“Positivity. I like it.” Catchers laughter was a little dry through the coms. “Probably the most ‘technically the truth’ thing I’ve ever heard in my life but...”

“We’ll take it,” Rei grunted.

“We’ll take it!” the Saber echoed enthusiastically.

And then they settled in, waiting for the Arena to announce the match. Waiting.

... And... waiting?

“... Uh...” Chancery was the first to speak again when almost 30 seconds had gone by without the disembodied voice calling for them to take their familiar positions. Even the red rings themselves hadn’t show up anywhere in view. “Did something go wrong?”

Rei’s stomach clenched at the question, and he couldn’t help but glance at Aria. He ended up meeting her gaze as her eyes flicked to him as well, and found his sudden concern echoed there. The last time something odd had happened while they’d been on a field together...

But that fearful thought was interrupted by a woman’s booming shout ringing out of the rain from their left, in the direction Rei *should* have been looking.

“Nothing’s wrong! Your first lesson is just to remember that having expectations on an SCT field is *never* a good idea!”

“CONTACT *LEF*—!” Rei started to yell, feeling his Cognition snap into place, intending to call on Shido as soon as he brought the team’s awareness around.

He didn’t even have time to finish his first thought before his frame flashed red and he registered a pale streak of light coming at him. In the fraction of a second

Shido's neuroline allowed him, he thought glimpsed the vague form of a tall, lithe shape hurtling in a dark blur towards them.

White, was the only think he registered in that instant. *White eyes*.

Then something blunt took him in the gut with all the force of a lightning bolt.

WHAM!

Rei went flying, whatever had hit him impacting so hard it shattered his reactive shielding like glass and blast him clean off his feet. He rocketed across the group, his body narrowly making it through a space between Chancery and Grant that some small unscrambled part of his brain registered must have been deliberately aimed for. To hit *that* hard *and* direct his mass through such a tight window??

And then, 20 feet away, he struck the ground, skipped once off the wet grass, then made an abrupt—and unkind—stop again the solid wood of one of the stormswept forest's many trees.

“*OOPFI!*”

All the air exploded out of Rei's lungs at once, and he crumbled across the dirty roots at the base of the tree in a curled heap, clutching at himself as he fought to breath. He could feel his Cognition whirring to clear his thoughts, and worked doubly to assist it, to focus.

Call! he thought over and over again, training his intention on Shido while he struggled to choke in even a mouthful of air. *Call! CALL!*

And then, at last...

“*C-CALL!*”

The command was barely rasped out, but his focus was clear, narrowed in on the feeling of the CADs bands around his wrist. In whirl of metal and light the Device came alive, and a second later Rei no longer felt the rain as Shido's black steel and blue vysetrium constructed itself into it's dark Brawler armor over the familiar white underlayer. The helm covered his face, leaving on the top of his head and smacked

white hair exposed, and almost at once Rei's breathing got easier, the mask actually lightly forcing air into his semi-paralyzed lungs to compensate for his offended diaphragm.

And then—at record speed—he was shoving himself out of the grass and mud onto his feet.

It took Rei a second to locate the fight, but that was less time than it would have had he not made a minor discovery in that moment. Through the downpour and trees, even the flashing of vysetrium-edged armor and blades was barely visible, and Rei might have missed it altogether had Shido's HUD not brought up the clean outline of five people, distinct despite the forest. Four of them were highlighted in blue, and Aria, Catcher, Chancery, and Logan's obvious forms and weapons were instantly recognizable.

As was—even if he'd only ever seen her fight on the feeds before—the redlined shape of Jetway and her white-tipped spear, the S-Ranked Lancer's movements a untouchable flitting of slips and ducks and dodges in Firesong's midst .

“Well *that's* handy,” Rei allowed himself to mutter, genuinely amazed.

Then he bolted straight for the fight, the pointed steel toes of his boots tearing into the wet earth as he moved.

He didn't make it two full strides.

The HUD's assistance, as it turned out, was even more useful than he thought. As he blew by a particularly wide spruce, he caught a second red outline through the evergreen's lowest branches, blinking into being at the very edge of his vision from where it had been waiting in hiding behind the tree. Rei had *just* enough time to wrench himself around to the right, getting both clawed hands up to catch the blistering kick he was greeted with on his crossed arms, the newcomer's armored foot slamming into Shido's steel plating with another *WHAM!*

Rei couldn't help but think he'd do well to *actually* learn to fly one day before he hit a *second* tree, slamming to a stop back-first, blasting into it so hard that bark and splinters of shattered wood went flying in all directions.

This time, though, he kept his footing.

An impressed whistle rang out through the rain.

“Damn, kid... I admit I did *not* expect you to block that...”

Another flash of red, from the left now, and Rei ripped around again. He didn't manage to get a block up, but the next hit was kinder, his assailant obviously laying off the gas a bit.

Not that that stopped Rei from being thrown onto his ass under the weight of it, forcing him to tuck into a backwards tumble that had him rolling so many times he lost count. Shido's long knuckle claws had always been versatile, though, and eventually he managed to get them planted in the soft earth, using the sudden pivot point as his body whipped up to shove off the ground with his fists.

As he arced through the air, he shouted as clearly as he could.

“Type Shift: Phalanx Mode!”

The blue arcs of electricity came and went, and by the time Rei landed, Shido's heavier plating was in place around his body. His claws were gone, replaced by the thick sword and massive tower shield, and with an ugly splash his feet sank a full inch and change into the wet dirt, the weight working against him in the storm. It didn't matter. What he needed in the moment was stability. Sure footing.

Defense.

“Well shit!” The shout came from behind him this time. “*That's* cool as hell!”

And then, before Rei could spin around, something long and thin took him in the back, hitting him like a dozen sledge hammers.

Shido didn't give.

Forced forward only a single hard step, the grass squelched under Rei's boots as he managed to haul himself around, shield up and sword swung out to side at the ready. Instantly his HUD worked its magic, and where he should by all means have seen nothing but rain and some hints of glowing vysetrium, Rei tensed as a shape appeared in red, having apparently retreated some a dozen feet back to try and hide in the storm.

Though he wasn't surprised, he felt a chill as he recognized Kalus Laurent's tall, strong-shouldered form.

The Atypical's "Triumverant" was a CAD of growing fame, and even without being able to make out its colors or details Rei could understand why. Heavy armor plating—more than the average Saber's, but not quite as thick as a Phalanx's—formed a threatening outline even against the display, with rounded shoulder guards and slender, dangerous barbs along the man's elbows and knees. His helmet, too, was rounded at the top, but Shido even outlined the narrow point the faceplate tapered to in the front and down at Laurent's chin. Only a single horizontal slash of wide, green vysetrium decorated it at eye-level, but this was made up for the the long, glowing plume of the same flowing color that tufted out from the top of his head, apparently unaffected by the rain.

Even mostly-hidden as he was, Kalus Laurent looked like a medieval knight pulled abruptly into the modern world.

There was, however, one thing that stood out. Whereas Rei thought he recalled that knights of old had been best known to carry swords or spears—or maybe maces or flails—in Laurent's right hand he held what looked like a standard, most-unadorned staff. It was slender, maybe a thumb-and-a-half thick, to the point that Shido's red highlight nearly formed a perfect line, almost obscuring the glow of the blunt vysetrium caps that tipped both ends of the steel. More of the element formed two narrow bands to trisected the weapon evenly along its haft, but even with these subtle decorations the staff hardly looked imposing compared to its master.

Rei would have known better even *if* he wasn't worried about calculating the potential interest his girlfriend's older brother had in "accidentally" braining him on their first day of training.

Woosh!

Laurent moved, nothing more than a blink of red in Shido's display as he flashed around in a quarter circle to Rei's left. From there his outline took a step forward—fortunately at a more considerate speed this time—but paused when Rei jerked southward to meet him. Another *whoosh!* of air, and the red vanished for a second. Rei did a 180, muddy water splashing up in an arc around him as he turned, and sure enough the Atypical's outline reappeared, having moved to try to get around behind him this time. Laurent paused again, then flicked sideline twice more, once some way to Rei's left, then back a full half-circle to the right. Each time Rei followed—if slower than he would have liked—keeping his shield as best he could between himself and S-Rank.

After one last attempt to flank him in which Laurent actually ran just shy of a full ring around Rei, the man stopped and simply watched him for a moment, seeming like he was trying to parse something out.

"Your CAD tracking me, Ward?" the man called through the rain.

"Something like that!" Rei shouted back, pulling his shield up a little higher until the top was at the bridge of his nose, just like Imala Cattori had taught him. Then he winced. "Uh... Sir!"

He thought he heard a chuckle over the storm.

"*Very* interesting... Here I *was* going to see what kind of punishment that armor of yours can take, but now I've got a better idea."

And then he vanished yet again.

Rei spun full around once more, but was surprised to find no hint of the man's shape. For a heartbeat he froze, his reduced Cognition working to process in the fraction of a second he knew he had to figure out this sudden puzzle.

It was the briefest pause in the fall of the rain, and momentary abatement in the drumming of water against his head, back, and shoulders, that clued him in.

Rei dropped to one knee, grunting with the strain of wrenching his shield up over his head. He only barely set in time, bracing the steel with both arms just as what had to have been Laurent's full weight slammed down into him, both of the man's steel boots landing in unison like pile driver. Rei's elbows gave a little, but the brace held, and with a snarl he pushed up, shoving the shield out and away in an attempt to steal the man's footing from under him.

But Laurent was long gone, Rei's suddenly-wild swing turning into an uncoordinated twist of his whole body that nearly toppled him sideways. In fact, the Atypical was already watching him from back out in the rain with helmet cocked and his free hand casual resting on his hip, like he couldn't for the world understand what Rei's uncoordinated hobble could have been about.

"Graceful!" Laurent called out as Rei found his balance again. "So it looks like you drop in Speed in this form? Veeeeerry interesting..."

And then the Atypical disappeared again, and Rei was forced to spin to look for him once more.

For what had to have been a full 5 minutes Laurent ran him in a *literal* circles, sometimes going left, sometimes right, sometimes from above again. A few times the S-Rank even appeared like magic *inside* Rei's guard, coming in so low he might have limboed under the shield at light speed. Each time Rei responded, whirling to face him, and each time Laurent vanished again to reappear somewhere else and from a totally different angle a blink later.

And then, almost out of the blue, the first hit came.

CLANG!

Rei swore, the blow ringing off the side of his helmet, slipping in around his shield. Given he still had his head Laurent had significantly held off, but the impact still left his temple throbbing as he staggered sideways.

“Yup. ‘Bout the right Speed I’d say.” The Atypical’s muttering—like he was talking to himself—was so close to Rei’s ear as he found his footing again that Aria’s brother could only have been leaning over directly over him. Rei whirled, swinging his shield, but was unsurprised to catch only air.

Then Laurent spoke again, just behind him. “I’m thinking any faster and you could proooobably block this, right?”

CLANG!

Another hit, off his left shoulder this time, and Rei was forced sideways again. He caught himself after two steps this time, and didn’t swipe around with his shield. Instead he held it as tight to himself as he could, reducing the amount of effort required to pivot.

As a result, he managed to catch Laurent *third* hit on the very edge of his defenses as he whirled, causing it to rebound and the S-Rank himself to step back in surprise.

In that moment, Rei got to take in Triumverant in truth for the first time. Crafting the makings of a lithe titan of dark red and black steel edged in pale green, the slick details of the CAD were brought into relief as the vysetrium reflected in shifting ripples off the wet armor. The points at Laurent’s knees and elbows were were solid metal 3 inches long, and each looked sharp enough to punch through a steel wall with hardly any effort. The plating overlaid and overlapped itself in an intricate pattered over his chest, torso, and legs, forming the false outline of solid muscle. What was more, heavier build of the Device didn’t seem to impede the S-Rank’s mobility in the least, because the man’s staff snapped into both his hands in a blur as he backed away that one step, coming up in a defensive hold that was clearly all instinct. The long weapon’s three sections were mostly crimson divided by those narrow bands of glowing green, with

slices of textured black set into each partion for additional grip. It's caps, swimming with Stryon particles, left a trail of light across Rei's vision as they snapped around, much like the long plume that weightlessly followed ever small motion of Laurent's head. Up close, Triumverant was mesmerizing.

Mesmerizing... and terrifying.

"Well *that* was an unexpected..." Rei heard the Atypical mutter with genuine surprise, and he thought he could tell Laurent was eyeing his shield from behind that slash of green across his face plate. "I heard you *just* got access to this form, Ward. That right?"

"A couple weeks ago, yes, sir." Rei answered clearly, not lowering his shield. Despite the pace of the fight and the beating, he was breathing easily.

Man high Endurance was useful...

Laurent nodded slowly. "I admit it then... I'm a little impressed. A *little*." Then he stood up straight, pointing his staff at Rei with one hand, who could hear the smile in his words as he continued. "Still... That just means you can handle a liiiittle more, doesn't it?"

Woosh-CLANG!

In a flash that left a hollow in the rain for a moment, Laurent closed the distance between them to slam Triumverant's leading tip into Rei's shield like a lance. Rei *barely* had time to lean into the blow, and even then he felt the metal give as he slid 5ft back through the grass and mud, his boot tearing twin furrows into the wet ground.

CLANG! CLANG! CLANG-CLANG-CLANG-CLANG!

The rain of hits came fast and thick. Laurent was still holding back what had to have been about 90% of his power, but he struck with such speed that the blows started to feel like a jackhammer against Rei's defense. 10, 20, 30 strikes in all of maybe 5 seconds. Rei grit his teeth, thinking fast. Any second now the Shido would—

CRACK!

With the ugly sound of shattering steel the shield gave, Triumverant punching a fist-sized hole right through it to send metal shrapnel flying everywhere. The Device's hit carried right through, striking Rei in the right shoulder to send him spinning like a top. His Defense held, though, his reactive shielding absorbing most of the hit.

Which let his Cognition continue to strain.

Phalanx is too slow, Brawler is too soft, Rei managed to decide even as he crashed once more to the forest floor. *Easy choice, then.*

"Type Shift: Saber Mode," he got out as he let go of the shield to tuck and logroll several yards away.

Then he came up slashing, his Speed improving, his mind clearing, and his sword lengthening even as he swung.

The blade missed Laurent by a good foot, though only because of the S-Rank's reaction time. He sidestepped the blow with ease, but Rei could have sworn he saw a nod of approval as Triumverant came around, under Shido's upswing. With no time to bring the blade into position, Rei snapped a leg up, catching the staff on the thick plating of his shin instead. The block hurt, but the armor held, and he took advantage of the earned moment to snap the sword down, aiming for the Atypical's extended wrist. He missed as Laurent flashed away again.

"Very nice!" he heard the man call from the rain behind him. "Good pivot!"

"Thank you, sir," Rei answered uncertainly, already slashing as he snapped around. Laurent caught Shido on his staff and forced it up and out of the way, then kicked forward, catching Rei in the gut to send him staggering. His Saber form wasn't as squishy his Brawler's, however, so he weathered the blow, leaping right back into the fight with a shout.

Maddison Kent appreciated that von Bor had extended the diameter of the floating viewing platform, expanding of the disk of solid white light by a few feet so that she and Ueno Jasper could comfortably watch the fight right alongside Valera, Rama, and the Rook-Class herself. From above the Team Battle field, the five of them alternated between watching Laurent prodding Reidon Ward's versatility to its limits and Wainwright putting a beating down on Aria, Catchwick, Cashe, and Grant. On occasion von Bor would make a comment—usually to the positive, sometimes gently critical—or ask a question of Valera about the squads training regimen, but otherwise the five of them stood in silence. Even Jasper Ueno looked on without speaking, and the woman's smile shifted between subtle satisfaction whenever she watched Ward's struggle and pleasant surprise when she took in the rest of the squad. Maddie didn't know how to feel about the fixer, she'd decided. In a weird, twisted sort of way Ueno made herself very likable, framed herself as an open, chatty, and forward character. Maddie supposed she *would* have liked her, in fact, were she not privy to the inscrutable woman's other... talents.

It was this consideration, in fact, that brought up a thought, which quickly evolved into a concern.

After stewing the idea over for a minutes, she checked briefly to make sure all eyes were on one battle or another below before tucking her stylus behind one ear and pulling up her frame. With her now-free hand, she typed out a quick message.

Did you review the Kamiya contract?

In front over her, Valera blinked as the notification hit her own NOED. She glanced back with a questioning look, and Maddie nodded in encouragement, trying to tell her girlfriend silently that the message was worth reading even given where they stood.

I did... The answer came after a second more. Guest wanted me to. Leveraged giving Kamiya access to the subbasement to make it happen. Why?

Did you notice the report requirements?

Report requirements?

To Kamiya, Maddie answered briefly.

... No?

Maddie almost sighed, at once amused and exasperated. If she'd learned anything in the time she'd been working in the military complex, it was that soldiers were never as detail-oriented as she thought they ought to be, all things considered.

Not that execs in the private sector were any better, she reminded herself as she typed, recalling some of the nightmare CEOs and the like she'd dealt with before coming on at Galens.

Captain von Bor and the other are required to provide a weekly progress report to Kamiya. A status update.

Oh, yep. Did see that.

General strengths and weaknesses, improvement, spec rankings, evolutions, Abilities. All of it.

In front of her, the edge of the prosthetic line Maddie could see along Valera's cheek warped slightly as she frowned.

Yes. Saw that. Like I said. And?

And is it a good idea to have Ward show all his cards only after you and Rama have a chance to impress on present company that certain things are best kept under wraps for the time being?

Valera looked back again then, gaze suddenly sharper. Maddie, in answer, only raised her eyebrows in emphasis before meaningfully tilting her head toward Ueno Jasper's turned back.

Kamiya has its fingers inside Central. Valera's message scrolled itself across her frame. That much is obvious. No way she doesn't already know.

Babe, you and I both know that 'knowing' and 'seeing' are two very different things when it comes to Ward. Not to mention there's no guarantee von Bor and the others know. And if you actually want the kids to get everything out of this sponsorship...

She let the statement hang, trusting her girlfriend to follow the logic. Sure enough, while Valera didn't glance back again for a minute, she seemed to be contemplating Maddie's argument. Seriously enough, at least, to forget to watch the fights for a while. Finally she seemed to come to some kind of decision, and when their eyes met again Valera's were narrowed.

Maddie just smiled back. She knew that look. It was the same she got whenever she convinced the woman their date nights would end a *lot* more enjoyably for both of them if they *didn't* do have a multi-movie marathon of old superhero flicks from the turn of the millennium. Resigned disappointment, accented with just a hint of frustration.

She'd won.

Satisfied, she watched Valera step up to stand beside Rama, tapping the colonel on the shoulder before leaning in to speak into his ear. A couple times the man, too, looked back at Maddie—if a little more underhandedly than her girlfriend had—and after some exchanged words seemed to take his own time to consider.

Then he nodded, said something to von Bor to get her attention, and glanced back again.

But not at Maddie this time.

“Miss Ueno, if you could join us at the front, there’s something we need to... discuss.”

Ueno Jasper didn’t even blink, her smile only broadening as she moved up as requested.

Only then did the colonel finally turn back to Valera.

“Let him know, would you, Captain?”

Rei and Kalus Laurent went at each other for a full quarter hour or so, never stopping, never pausing. Rei swapped in and out of Shido’s Saber and Brawler Modes so many times the forms started to feel melded together, and half dozen even dipped back into Phalanx just to take advantage of the topped-out Endurance to get his wind back. He was finally confident that Laurent wasn’t out to beat him to a pulp—at least not for the time being—so Rei instead poured everything he had into the exchange itself, every hour he and Firesong had put into practice lately, with and without Bretz and the other sub-instructors alike. As a result he thought he made a good showing of the assessment—because what else could it have been, given he’d been deliberately separated from the squad from the go?—with Laurent pushing a little more every minute or so, like he wanted to find the ceiling of Rei’s and Shido’s ability.

Whether fortunately or unfortunately, by the time Rei started having wincing flashbacks of the day Christopher Lennon had run him ragged the weekend before his final Intraschool match, the man definitely found it.

Or at least the limits of what he could show...

WHAM-WHAM!

A combo strike of Triumverant’s staff and a booted foot. The first to the side of Rei’s right shin, slamming his legs out from under him, the second to his torso again in

the fraction of a second he hung half-suspended in the air, arms and Brawler claws flailing. There was no tree at his back to stop him this time, so he cannoned through the woods until he splashed down in a tumbling skip to the earth once more. Yet again he was on his feet in a flash, and yet again he set himself at the ready, blades bared, scanning the rain for a sign of Laurent. He was in the thick of the combat area now, in the heaviest part of the Woodlands field, and all he saw were the shadowy forms of evergreens and underbrush through the storm.

“Not bad, Ward. Seriously. Not bad *at all*.”

Rei would have whipped around, but the words were accompanied by a heavy hand on his shoulder, at once a pat of approval and a grip holding him in firmly place. He paused and looked around to find the S-Ranked standing behind him yet again, the man’s faceplate—still outlined in red—dipping in approval once more.

“A User-Unique Ability. As a *first* year.” The words came out with something like a sigh of envy, and Laurent let his hand drop to his hip, Triumverant over his own shoulder, the staff tapping up and down against the armor there as though by habit. “*And* you seem to have a good head for it. You been putting a *lot* of time in, haven’t you?”

“Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.” Unsure of what else to say, Rei decided to play it safe. “Our instructors have been a big help. We’ve been getting extra time with them almost every day.”

“Yeah... I can tell.” Laurent seemed to take him in from behind the visor for a second. “You’ve got a few weaknesses, though. You’re not nearly as capable in your Phalanx... ‘Mode’ did you call it?” He waited for Rei to nod in confirmation. “Gotcha. Yeah, you’re not nearly as capable in you Phalanx Mode as the other two. Saber’s also noticeably weaker than Brawler, but it’s better.”

“Had it a bit longer, sir. Couple of months.”

“Heard that. Also heard your CAD was essentially manifesting as Brawler since assignment, so that makes sense.” He let out a grunt. “*Three* Types... You’ve been putting the hours in, kid, but you’ve got a looooot more ahead of you if you want to make them all useful.”

“Yes, sir. Agreed, sir.” Rei decided it wasn’t the time to voice his suspicion that *three* was just the start, if Shido kept growing the way it was.

“That’s long term, though. In the short term, there’s an easier opportunity for improvement. Verbal commands are slowing you down. A *lot*. Jetway says it’s the same thing for the rest of the squad other than dear baby sis. It’s a little early for your year, but it’s definitely the first thing we’ve got to deal with given all of you already have Abilities. *Especially* in your case.”

Even though he knew the man couldn’t see his face, he still fought to keep from swallowing nervously. For 15 minutes or so he’d managed to forget who *exactly* it was he was standing in front of, but Laurent’s reminder that he was Aria’s older brother had brought the anxious horror flooding *right back real* quick.

He worked hard to keep his voice even as he answered.

“Uh... Yes, sir. That was the team’s hope, I think.”

“You think?”

“I know, sir.”

Laurent chuckled. “Good. Always best to *know* on the battlefield, Ward. Whenever you can.” The staff abruptly stopping it’s tapping on his shoulder. “Oh, and speaking of: Your last issue might be the biggest.” He brought his free hand up again to point an armored finger at where his ear would have been under his helmet. “Anyone ever tell you you’re not good at listening?”

Rei frowned behind his mask. No, he *hadn’t* ever been told as much that he could recall. At least not by an instructor.

“Er... Not really, sir...?” he answered tentatively, hoping for clarification. The S-Ranked was nodding once more, and Rei again heard the grin in the man’s voice.

“The Second Lieutenant already told you, didn’t she? *Never* have expectations on an SCT field. Remember?”

There was a second, a frozen moment, in which Rei stared at the Atypical, not understanding.

And then the implication registered, but not before he could do anything about the staff that came swinging at his head again, a sharp blur of red, black, and gold.

... *Wait... Gold?*

WHAP!

Rei staggered back two steps, but not because of any hit. Instead, a hand—slim but so, *so* strong—had shoved him out of the way as a tall, familiar figure in officer’s regulars appeared seemingly out of thin air between him and Laurent.

“That was sly of you, Sergeant Major. Maybe we ease into psych tactics a *little* slower, what do you say?”

Firm and regal in her black and golds, the Iron Bishop stood separating Rei and the Atypical in the rain, a sudden, impenetrable wall outlined in white that had saved him from what would probably have been a nasty headache. Terrifyingly, she hadn’t even had to call on Kestrel to stop the hit, having caught the staff with one bare hand, her other now loose and relaxed by her hip.

In front of her, it seemed to take the sergeant major a moment to catch up to the woman’s sudden appearance. This

Then he laughed.

“Yes, ma’am,” he told her genially. “I promise I was just gonna ring his bell. It’s good to stay on your toes in a fight.”

Again Rei couldn’t help a flashback of doubling over and wondering why he’d bothered packing lunch.

“Preaching to the choir, officer,” Dent answered with her own grin. She hadn’t let go of Triumverant, though, something Laurent hadn’t missed.

“Uh... Mind giving me back my weapon, ma’am?” he asked politely, giving the steel a small tug.

“Not just yet. I’ve seen your fights, Laurent. You’re *very* good at hiding cards up your sleeve. *But*—” her smile widened slightly “—you’re not the only one. Actually, I’m thinking you two have *ample* reason to get along, if just cause of that.”

And then, still smiling, Dent looked around at Rei.

“Ward. Had a chat with Captain von Bor and the colonel. How would you feel about surprising the sergeant major, here?”

Rei blinked at her, unsure of what the woman was talking about for a second.

Then it clicked, and his mouth dropped open behind his visor.

“Uh... Ma’am?” he asked. “You sure about that...?”

“Pretty sure,” Dent answered pleasantly, still holding onto Laurent’s staff. For his part, the man was looking between the two of them now, the movement something between confused and curious.

Rei barely noticed, excitement building suddenly. It definitely hadn’t been his intention, but...

“Ma’am, what about...?” He paused choosing his words carefully, thinking of Jasper. “Uh... Present company...?”

Dent, though, snorted.

“You and Maddie. Birds of a feather, apparently,” she muttered

“Ma’am...?” Rei asked, not following.

“Nothing,” the captain told him, watching Laurent pull at his weapon again with a glint of amusement in her brown eyes. “Like I said, we all had a chat. And there’s some things you can’t keep hidden forever, right Cadet?”

Rei's anticipation redoubled. His nerves too, but that was okay. It was true, after all. They *wouldn't* be able to keep things hidden forever, much less *want* to. Especially not if Rei actually hoped to take full advantage of the Kamiya deal. With every tool at his disposal, he'd practically be training with one arm tied behind his back.

So if the colonel and Dent were in approval, and *if* Firesong *actually* wanted to get everything they could out of this sponsorship... wasn't now as good a time as ever?

Starting to grin himself, Rei took two quick leaps back from Dent and Laurent, figuring he might as well get the point across *very* clearly. Once he was a dozen yards away and the pair were nothing but two white and red outlines through the downpour, he fell into an offensive crouch, calling on Shido to shift as he did. He knew there wasn't a world in which any weapon he brought to bear could have broken through an S-Rank's reactive shielding—much less their armor—but not even the best Users in the universe could beat *physics*, right...?

Once Phalanx Mode's heavy shield was set on his arm again, he yelled out into the storm.

“Permission to surprise the sergeant major, ma'am?”

In his HUD, he saw Dent's outline finally let go of the man's weapon, then vanish from sight in a blink. She must have leapt back up to the viewing disk she'd probably dropped from in the first place, because her clear answer came from above.

As it did, Rei finally let himself acknowledge the notification that had been blinking at him on one side of the visor for the last 10 minutes or so.

“Permission granted, Cadet! Show him what you've got!”

Laurent had been left standing confused, still awkwardly holding his staff exactly where it had been. He peered first in Rei's direction—undoubtedly following Shido's blue glow—then half turned to look himself up in the direction of the stormy sky.

“Sorry, but I’m a little lost!” he called out, letting his weapon drop to his side and raising his other hand like a first year asking a question in class. “Could someone fill me in, or am I just supposed to guess what—?”

Rei didn’t wait for the man to finish. Taking advantage of the S-Ranked’s turned back, he focused on his target, on the place he wanted to go.

Then, with a breath, he took a single, deliberate step forward.

“Temporal Step.”

Chapter 18

The world warped around Rei. In a blink of time nonexistent he saw again the faces of his hole visions, the myriad cacophony of youthful men and women alike, of all races, sizes, and settings. He focused, focused like he’d be working so, *so* hard on for weeks now, willing himself to stay present, to stay aware of the solid feeling of matter beneath his back foot and promise of knowing it again on his front. In less than an instant he saw everything. He saw the woods and the rain and sodden grass. He saw the path of destruction he and Laurent had ripped through the trees and the distant ring of the horizon the Arena projected all around them. He even caught the briefest flash of the fight still raging between Jetway and the others. Aria was in midair with teeth bared, leaping with shield forward and spear drawn back to strike. Logan had been laid out, Honoris’ axe in the middle of spinning away. Catcher and Chancery were still on their feet, closing in from both sides on the S-Rank—whose green-brown armor and white vysetrium Rei glimpsed for the first time in truth—as Wainwright crouched in a ready stance in their midst, her spear a vibrant bolt of colorless lightning held in both hands.

And then it all pulled into that bottomless point in front of Rei, leaving the world empty and nothing for less time than he thought one's mind should register before momentum and light returned to his surroundings with an expanding blast of color.

And not even Kalus Laurent—S-Ranked Pawn-Class that he was—could be totally ready for his simultaneous vanishing and reappearance into the solid nature of reality.

To be fair, the Atypical *had* whipped around to face where Rei had been. The Ability's vocal command had warned him that *something* was happening, and he'd made himself as prepared as he could, but there was no degree of Speed that could completely prepare one for the instant nature of Temporal Step's jump. His Cognition should have compensated, allowing him to correct, but either Laurent hadn't engaged the spec fully so as to make the assessment a bit more leveled, or the combination of a lack of information, confusion, and his opponent's sudden disappearance was enough to momentarily overpower even the S-Rank's processing. Likely the former, Rei just had time to decide, having seen more than one of his new trainer's recent professional matches.

Whatever the case, however, the *critical* factor was something that no User, no matter their specs, could have anticipated: the fact that Rei hadn't 'Stepped' into the space before Laurent, into the area the Atypical had whirled around to face the vocal command had been spoken.

Instead, Rei had jumped right passed the man, having focused on the ground he'd pretended he could see between the the sergeant major's feet through the rain, ending up back to back with him and fully ready to take advantage of the trick.

Nausea roiled up through Rei's gut as he whirled, shield swing around. It was hardly the violent degree of illness it had once been, though, and he clamped hold of it with hardly a thought even as he spun. To his great thrill he found Laurent still facing away from him, the man's attention not have strayed from the place Rei had been. In that instant, Rei knew he would land his hit. Long as it was, Triumverant's staff didn't have

the room to maneuver to block. He was inside his opponent's guard. Even if the shield bounced harmlessly off the Pawn-Class' impenetrable reactive shield, even if he was sent flying when the retaliatory blow came, he knew he *would* land his hit.

At least until he caught just the barest glimpse whirling green light and shifting metal.

BOOONG!

Rei's shield struck narrow, red-and-black steel with the sound of a gong. Intent as he'd been on just *getting* the strike, he hadn't set his feet to brace himself, so the impact sent him staggering back as the heavy steel rebounded. He only found his footing after several stumbling strides, momentarily confused as to what had happened.

For once, his Cognition wasn't ahead of his own knowledge, and Rei cursed even as his pulse started to race again, taking in the sight before him that he realized he absolutely *should* have expected.

Kalus Laurent hadn't moved from where he'd seemed to be trying to find Rei through the storm. He hadn't turned around, nor even lifted from the ready crouch he'd slipped into the moment he'd obviously realized something was off. For the first time now that he had a good look at the sergeant major's back, Rei saw the narrow lines of green staggered along Triumverant's plated spine, gleaming off the wet metal of the shorter, 1-inch spikes that adorned each intricate section. Larger plates moved and flexed in a protective imitation of shoulder blades, and the Styron particles rippled like individual strands of hair in the glowing vysetrium tail of his helmet.

Rei barely registered any of it, too busy was he glaring at the staff the man still held in both hands.

Or what had *been* a staff, at least...

Triumverant had changed. Quick as thought, the weapon no longer formed the solid, slim shape of the capped shaft Laurent had been using to beat him silly for the past quarter hour. Instead, the twin rings of vysetrium had split and formed two trailing,

flexible lines connecting the three equally-sized partitions of cylindrical steel that had originally formed the length of the weapon. The center of this trio was still in front of Kalus, pulled up tight against his chest.

The other two, however, were behind him, one held in each hand over one shoulder and up at an angle from around his lower back, forming the defensive X of crossed metal that Shido had bounced off of so solidly the shield might as well have been made of rubber.

“Dammit,” Rei grumbled as Laurent finally started to straighten and turn. With a practiced whip and twist of one wrist, Triumverant whirled, the sansetsukon—the three-part staff it had become—collapsing over itself to snap into the waiting grasp of the man’s right hand.

Then the sergeant major lifted the folded weapon to point the stacked rods straight at Rei.

“Okay, Ward...” Laurent sounded somewhere between wary and awestruck. “I’ll bite... What in the *MIND* was that??”

Rei had opened his mouth to answer, but a voice interrupted him before he could get the words out.

“Something I would like to know myself.” The call came from above, calm and steady, but thunderous even over the endless thrum of the downpour. It wasn’t Dent this time, either. “Is that a charged Ability, Ward, or repeatable?”

“Uh... Charged, ma’am,” Rei answered the sky, unsure of where to look.

Having Serena von Bor call down upon you from stormy heavens didn’t help his original impression of the woman as some ancient god of myth.

“Single or multi?”

“Single, ma’am.” Rei had to fight not to let his stomach turn at the idea of stacking charges allowing for *chained* Steps, miserable a thought as it was.

At least as he was now...

“Interesting...” the captain’s voice came again. “That’s good enough for me, at the moment. I’m more of a ‘show, don’t tell’ enthusiast. If you would continue, Cadet Ward. Let’s see that Ability triggered as often as you can, please.”

This time, Rei didn’t hesitate.

“Yes, ma’am!”

And then, calling on Brawler Mode again, he shot at Laurent in a shearing splash of rain and mud.

If the sergeant major had been hard to catch by surprise before, it was doubly so now. Fighting with the three-part staff, the man’s combat style had *completely* changed, becoming snappier and more fluid. The weapon whirled around him in a constant blur, flashing from one hand to the other, then into both, then flicking up into the air totally free only to be snatched up again a fraction of a second later. Rei did his best to work around the staff, did his best to get in and under Laurent’s guard, but even setting aside the S-Rank’s superior Speed and Cognition, Triumverant’s newfound flexibility was an impassable nightmare. The staff was at once as stable as a Saber’s balanced form, as versatile as a Duelist’s paired blades, and as dangerous as a Lancer’s reach, all depending on what Laurent needed it to be. The latter in particular was a problem for Rei, especially since the twin strands of vysetrium that connected the three sections didn’t seem to have a fixed length. Indeed, more than once he was *sure* he saw the glowing green bonds abruptly extend, the space between the steel rods suddenly lengthening from a few inches too as much as 2 feet or so before snapping back again. More than once Rei felt a pang of envy, particularly after this exact trick resulted in him getting caught across the face for the *second* time. Arsenal Shift had been his dream, *especially* since being assigned Shido. It was the ace of so many high-level Atypicals—who were statistically much more likely to develop the Ability than any other Type—and had once been part of the ideal path he’d seen for himself after he’d started to realize the heights he and the Device might climb to.

Not that I can really complain, can I? Rei thought, smirking as he ducked under a snapping sweep from Triumverant, calling on his Saber Mode and coming up swinging with both hands before the blade even finished manifesting into his ready grasp.

Laurent, of course, swept the blow away like it was nothing, but that was the moment the now-familiar notification pinged Rei's HUD for the second time that fight.

TEMPORAL STEP: READY

Rei accepted Triumverant's next blow full on the flat of Shido's blade, accepting the impetus of the hit to let himself be sent flying even as he tucked and somersaulted back. Slamming the clawed fingers of his left hand into the grass, he cut another series of furrows through the earth before coming to a stop in a crouch, sword out to the side and at the ready.

He didn't trigger the Ability until after he started bolting forward again, bringing the blade around and headward like he was going to thrust it at Laurent's chest.

Then...

"Temporal Step," he ordered, focusing hard as he tried to keep his voice low.

The world flashed away and back, and Rei blinked to Laurent's left side, slipping right by him as he instead slashed around and down at the back of Laurent's exposed knees. Unsurprisingly the three-part staff was there in a blink to block him, but Rei was passed the man before the follow-up strike could catch him between the shoulders, getting clear of even the staff's extended range and turning to face the sergeant major again.

"What the *hell...?*" he thought he heard the man grunt through his faceplate, and Rei almost grinned despite his redoubled nausea.

Without pause, he charged in again.

Five more times Rei Stepped, and five more times he managed to catch the sergeant major by surprise—if not managing to land a blow despite this. To his credit, Laurent didn't grow remotely frustrated as the fight wore on into the 5, then 10, the 15 minutes it took to build up use the charges. Instead, then man only sounded like he was talking to himself more every time the Ability was triggered. Rei heard the man mutter “A Speed boost?” once, then “No. Too quick...” like the Atypical was taking mental notes. Another time Laurent blocked another hammering shield strike from where Rei had appeared behind him once more, muttering about “Useful for offense *and* escape...?” as he did.

It was this question, after what had to have been a quarter hour, that triggered the idea.

Well... That and the fact that Rei was almost sure he had at *most* one more Step in him before he decorated the rain-washed grass with what was left of his dinner.

For a few more minutes they traded blows, back and forth, back and forth. As anticipated Laurent never tried to outright FDA Rei, who admittedly took advantage of this to fight as viciously as he could, slipping in and out of each of Shido's forms as often as the situation would allow. He wanted to turn the sergeant major's own words against him, wanted to set the man's expectation, to believe he knew what was coming next. At the same time, Rei did his best to be subtle about moving them through the woods, striking and retreating deliberately, pushing and pulling the Atypical in a semi-random pattern. Searching. Searching. Even after Temporal Step charged up again, he kept going. Even after he thought he detected a hint of uncertainty in Laurent's low muttering and heard the man ask “Limited on uses...?”, he kept going. Searching. Search—

And then, in the corner of his vision, a flash of blue and red, and Rei grinned.

“Type Shift: Phalanx Mode,” he ordered through breaths that had been coming heavier and heavier despite regularly swapping into higher Endurance to recover.

Shido's plating thickened and the shield appeared in one hand. Instead of closing in, though, Rei danced back, dodging a sweep of the three-part staff.

And then, with a grunt and as much power as he could muster, he *threw* the shield straight at Laurent's face.

"What the—?!" he actually heard the man grunt as the massive piece of metal hurtled towards his head. Rei made out the *CLANG* of Triumverant knocking it harmlessly away, and might have tried to listen for the sound it spinning off into the trees next. But the shield, he knew, had disappeared the moment the sergeant major had struck it aside.

It had whirled back into him, returning to Shido's thinning plating as Rei had called on his Brawler form as he spun on his heel and bolted away from Laurent as fast as his boosted Speed could take him.

He heard the man call after him, surprised and confused, through the storm. Rei ignored him, hurtling through the woods in the direction of the flickering blue and hint of red he could make out through the rain-drenched trees. Obviously Laurent could have caught him in a blink if he'd wanted to, could have snatched him up by the scruff of his armored neck and dragged him kicking and screaming back into the woods, but he didn't think the Atypical would do that. He was banking on the man's interest in observing his *choices* as much as his ability as a fighter.

Let's see what he makes of this, then, Rei thought, finally allowing himself that grin.

Barely a second more and he was close enough. He allowed himself another heartbeat, another breath and a maxed straining of everything he could get out of his Cognition to time the moment. Here Aria was retreating from a sweeping white blur. There Catcher was taking a hammering kick on one armored arm. It was Logan and Chancer who were moving together now, the Lancer using the boy's body as cover to mask her thrusts from around his bulk.

And there, in the middle of them, Rei watched the red out line of his target twist and turn in the rain, moving almost lazily despite her blazing speed, deflecting and dodging and striking out among the blitzing flurry of blows.

He saw his chance. Catcher slashed out, forcing the woman to twist around to parry the sword aside with easy grace. Rei was finally close enough to see the blurred glow of true color through the rain, to make out the faintest hint of a stacked pair of blazing white eyes turn away from him, inadvertently presenting an open back to unknown danger.

Rei took the opportunity with grunted order.

“Temporal Step.”

He didn’t bother calling for a more aggressive form, didn’t bother planning for the optimized attack. He was pretty sure *entire* of the squad could have struck out all at the same time with every Ability they had between them and not gotten so much as a *spark* out of Jayden Wainwright’s shielding. He wasn’t trying for damage. He just. Wanted. The hit.

And this time... Rei got it.

The world flickered away and back, and he put every ounce of focus he could into his momentum, into not stopping even as his front foot suddenly found softer, well-churned ground. He’d already brought his arms to his chest and tucked his chin, and so it was with armored shoulder set that he blinked into being as close to Jetway as he could have hoped. If she’d seen him coming he knew the woman could have dodged, could have twisted out of the way in the fraction of a moment she would have had to register his appearance.

But she didn’t, and Rei’s shoulder took her in the back at full speed, steel meeting reactive shielding with a solid *THUD!*

It was like he’d run full speed into a boulder.

Rei bounced half-off, half-around the woman as the awkward angle of his shoulder twisted his body under the impetus. He heard a *pop* from the joint, and pain erupt up his neck and down his arm as he felt the whole limb go mostly limp. With something between a yell and a curse he staggered by Wainwright, tripping over his own clawed toes to tumble down into the mud, rolling twice before coming to a halt on his back, where he allowed himself to stay. He'd managed it. He'd gotten the hit.

Which meant it was time to pay the price.

Nausea welled up once more, so strong it quickly turned to an uncomfortable clenching of his stomach, but Rei didn't recall Shido. He'd gotten used to the steadily-waning discomfort of Stepping, and he knew the Device wasn't about to let him hurl just yet. Instead, he clutched at his right shoulder with his left hand, feeling the odd shape of the joint that his armor had shifted to accommodate, groaning in pain as he made out text he'd never seen before scroll itself out across the corner of his HUD, the words a bolder red than even the usual "injury" registration.

[TRUE] skeletal muscle damage registered.

[TRUE] right glenohumeral joint dislocation registered. [TRUE] right glenohumeral joint capsule strain registered.

Emergency field protocols enacted. Cause: [TRUE] injury. Requesting User permissions modification.

...

Permissions granted. User WARD may now voluntarily exit simulated combat.

...

Does User WARD wish to exit simulated combat?

YES/NO

“Well *that’s* new...” Rei muttered through clenched teeth, squeezing his throbbing shoulder tighter even as he selected “NO” with a quick glance. He’d taken actual damage on the field before—what the Arena seemed to label “TRUE” damage—but on reflection it had always been enough to knock him clean out of the fight, like during the Sectionals hack.

He was in the middle of making a mental note *not* to run headfirst at an S-Ranked User again—thinking he proobably should have seen this particular outcome coming—when a blaze of light lit up the majority of his display.

Rei froze, barely managing to so much as blink as he stared up the shaft of a truly beautiful weapon. The spear was almost *entirely* made of white vysetrium, with little more than a single foot-long core of green and brown steel forming the center of its length. The glowing ivory blade was cruelly curved and hooked at the end, like the tip of a harpoon, and had to have been a hand-and-a-half wide and three times as long. It was practically a sword attached to the end of a long shaft, Rei thought.

And its edge was currently at his throat, so close he could see the hint of his own blue gleaming off the shifting white.

“Ward...” Jayden Wainright growled, her Device’s two pairs of stacked, glowing eyes—the lower couple slightly smaller than the upper—seeming to glare down at him from within the frame of an opaque, curved faceplate of green steel. “What. The hell. Was *that*...?”

For a second Rei was still too busy blinking cross-eyed at the point of second lieutenant’s spear to answer. The tip of the weapon was so close to his Adam’s apple, he knew it had penetrated Shido’s shielding without so much as an ounce of resistance.

Then he carefully drew his left hand away from his shoulder—careful to avoid the woman’s blade as he pulled it around and under the Device—to offer her up an awkward salute from flat on the ground.

“Uh... Surprise, ma’am...?” he offered with a uncertain laugh.

Chapter 19

“Surprise?” Wainwright demanded, still holding the spear to Rei’s neck liked she’d forgotten it was there. “*Surprise??* Kid, where did you *come* from?? One sec I’m playing ring around the rosy with the rest of your squad, the next you’re doing your damndest to shove your shoulder so far up my rear I could have wagged you like a *tail!* What *was* that??”

Rei had opened his mouth to answer, thinking he might as well come clean, when a man’s voice beat him to it.

“It’s some kind of teleporting ability. Instant displacement. Carries his *whole* body, Device included. It’s charged-based, seems to take about 100 to 150 seconds of combat to build up depending on intensity, and *doesn’t* seem to have a max usage limit.”

Kalus Laurent had caught up. The sergeant major came strolling into their midst, Triumverant still called, the three-part staff once more folded into one hand as he swung it casually at his side. Around them, Rei realized the rest of Firesong had stopped fighting, all of them glancing nervously at one another, Devices still glowing through the downpour.

“Tele—?” Jetway started, looking around at the sergeant major in apparent disbelief. “I’m sorry, storm must be louder than I thought. I swear I just heard you use the word ‘*teleportation*’...”

Laurent chuckled, stopping beside her and bring the folded staff up to tap against his should once more.

“Nothing wrong with your ears, ma’am,” he answered, though the green slash across his faceplate was turned down towards Rei. “I did indeed.”

For a second Jetway stared him. Then her four eyes turned to Rei, then back again. Twice more she did this, like she was waiting for someone to let her in on the joke. The whole while her spear never so much as shivered where she still held it to Rei's throat.

"... You're shitting me," the woman finally got out in a strained voice. "Teleportation? No way. And *no* usage cap?? What kind of broken Ability is *that*?? Even for a *User-Unique* that's *insane*."

"To be fair, it does seem to have some drawbacks." Kalus Laurent was still looking Rei up and down, like he was taking the opportunity to study him in full now that he'd finally been made to hold still. "Mostly guessing, but his balance, proprioception, and general movement dipped a little every time he activated it, then recovered. Impact got worse after each trigger, and recovery took longer. If I had to, I'd say its draining, either physically or mentally. Maybe both." He squatted, then brought his staff down to *plink* Rei lightly on the armor Shido's forehead with the weapon. "Clue us in, Cadet. Which is it?"

"It's motion sickness."

There was a light squelching of wet grass, and a familiar pair of green eyes were suddenly taking up Rei's vision, framed in a broad, upside-down U of red-and-gold steel he was still getting used to. Aria stuck Hippolyta's spear point first in the mud as she knelt down at his side—practically elbowing her older brother out of the way as she did—loose strands of hair tracing wet lines across her freckled face, neck, and shoulders.

"Ma'am, he's hurt." She addressed Wainwright without looking away around at her, studying Rei's shoulder with brow knit as she placed the hand not still holder her shield on his other arm. "*Actually* hurt."

"Ya think?" the second lieutenant snort. Still, Aria's pointing out the injury seemed to shake her into the moment, because she finally snapped her spear away to stake it, too, into the ground beside her. "Broken Ability or not, what C-Rank in their right *mind*

thinks it's a good idea to charge an *S-Ranked* User on the field?" She crossed her plated arms, four eyes glaring down at Rei. "Aren't you supposed to be *smart*, Ward? Pretty sure anyone could have told him that was going to end up badly, myself included."

"I get the impression Cadet Ward would have been unlikely to heed your thoughts on the matter even if you *had* had the opportunity to share them, second lieutenant."

The sound of the rain suddenly dimmed, then quit outright, and a moment later Rei winced as the support of the ground beneath his bad shoulder faded away. He started to drop, Aria still kneeling beside him in midair with her brother at her left, and even as they descended he saw the ceiling of the sub-basement once more as the field depixelated around them, with the white observation disk coming back into view a second later.

At its forward edge, Serena von Bor was peering down at him with interest, still leaning into the cane in the middle of the group formed by her, Dent, Guest, Maddison Kent, and Jasper.

"Ward, recall your Device," the woman ordered as Rei felt the familiar press of the projection plating against Shido's back. "Captain Dent, if you could call us a medical drone, please? Best to be safe, though I doubt that shoulder is anything more than dislocated. If it were broken, I think we'd hear a lot more screaming."

"You'd be surprised," Rei swore he heard Dent, Aria, *and* a nearby Catcher all mutter at the same time, but the Bishop did as she was asked the moment they reached the floor, the observation platform sinking into the steel and vanishing. The familiar whir of propellers was heard, and then Aria—who'd already recalled Hippolyta—was taking him gently by his good arm and around his upper back to help sit him up.

"Recall," Rei grunted, half to comply, and half as a distraction from the renewed wash of nausea this change of position earned him. Shido vanished in a whirl, and when he had control of his gut again Rei braved a glance at his right shoulder.

“Ew,” he muttered, more in annoyance than anything else. “Yup. Deeeefinitely shouldn’t look like that, should it?”

“You’re awfully nonchalant, kid.”

Looking around, Rei found Wainwright and Kalus Laurent watching him, CADs returned to their wrists to reveal their gold-on-black combat suits once again. While Aira’s brother looked nothing more than politely uninvolved as he stood again, the second lieutenant was grimacing at his misshapen shoulder with obvious discomfort, her own arms still crossed.

“That doesn’t hurt like hell?” she asked, cocking her head like doing so might let her see the joint as it should be.

“Uh…” Rei struggled to find the right way to explain. After a second he nodded, but simultaneously gestured at his scarred arms and legs. “I guess so? It’s kind of… a comparison thing for me?”

“Meaning what?” Kalus Laurent asked, green eyes tracing the markings along Rei’s limbs intently now, like their indication had given him permission to further exam them.

Rei didn’t get a chance to answer, because Aria karate-chopped him lightly in the side of the head just as the medical drone arrived.

“Meaning he’s a great big idiot who doesn’t seem interested in *ever learning his own limits*,” she growled, pushing herself up and away from him so the bot could do its job. “Seriously, Rei… People are gonna think you *like* pain, at this rate.”

“Oh, that’s like a hundred-and-ten percent already happening.” Catcher appeared, also back in his red-on-grey school combat suit, grinning down at Rei as he came to stand behind Aria. “I found a whole a feed the other day dedicated to chatting about if the Iron Prince was a certified masochist. Weird place. Only like twenty people in it, but kinda funny to—”

“Catcher, do I want to know *how* you found a feed like that?” Chancery asked with a sigh, stepping around to Rei’s other side as she shook her head with hands on her hips.

“You know you don’t,” Grant grunted, smirking a little from just behind her before looking down at Rei. “You good?”

“Right as rain.” Rei tried to offer a thumbs up, but realized he needed his good arm to prop himself up into a sitting position now that Aria wasn’t supporting him.

In front of him, Wainwright was shaking her head, eyebrows halfway to her hairline.

“Cadets the days are made of scary stuff,” she muttered. “I woulda been puking.”

“Modest of you, Second Lieutenant. I seem to recall hearing of a Duel of yours where you broke a wrist and four ribs and *still* came out on top.”

von Bor’s cane made an audible *click* with every step she took as she approached the group, only a little more distinct than Maddison Kent and Jasper’s heels on the steel floor. The old woman stopped to stand before Rei’s right side, looking down on him with that same subdued interest that still felt like more emotion than the old woman usually let on.

If he had to guess, Rei suspected he’d made an impression, and he could only hope it had been a good one.

“Drone says your arm is fine, Ward,” the Ivory Shield, continued, eyeing the bot that was still whirring around scanning him from every angle. “No breaks, just dislocated.”

Rei nodded. “Thank you, ma’am,” he answered, leveraging himself with his good hand to get around onto his knees. Aria immediately moved to help him, guiding him up until he was standing before the officers again. “They can probably fix that at the hospital pretty quick if I could be exc—”

“Oh there’s no need for that,” von Bor cut him off smoothly, black-and-gold eyes moving to Kalus Laurent. “Sergeant Major?”

“Ma’am,” came the simple answer.

Then, before Rei could begin to follow what was happening, Aria’s brother was at his other side, had taken his loose right arm in both hands, and given the limb a single practiced tug and lift.

The *pop* of the ball and socket finding each other again was audible.

Rei briefly saw stars as the pain flared in momentary bloom of agony, and if Aria hadn’t already been half holding him up he was pretty sure he would have staggered. He grit his teeth, and after two sharp breaths the ache faded, then disappeared almost altogether.

Opening his eyes—when had he shut them?—he grimaced around at his shoulder to find it whole and normal again, the awkward drop of the dislocation corrected in a flash.

“Thank you, sir,” he told the sergeant major. “And *owe*.”

Kalus Laurent only grinned back at him, a wicked, knowing glint in those eyes that were *so* like his sister’s.

Before him, though, von Bor had already moved on.

“Cadet Laurent, you said something about ‘motion sickness?’” The Rook-Class was looking at Aria intently. “Elaborate, if you would.”

Aria tensed beside him, and Rei glanced around to find her with mouth open, looking uncertainly from him to the von Bor, then to Dent on the old woman’s left. She seemed unsure of how to answer, or maybe if to answer at all, actually.

It was Guest who rescued her.

“I’ll handle that, Captain,” the colonel cut in, stepping forward. “Ward’s situation is... a bit more nuanced than a student is equipped to elaborate on.”

As soon as von Bor, Jetway, Jasper, and Kalus Laurent had all turned towards him, the man started to explain. Rei felt Aria's grip relax around his arm a little, and heard her give a small sigh of relief.

"Woulda been interesting to hear you talk that one out to the *Ivory Shield*," he told her with a quiet laugh.

"Shut up," she grumbled, giving his arm a small shake. Still, she smiled slightly. "You good? I probably shouldn't hold onto you longer than I have to."

Rei considered his stomach, then nodded. Any dizziness was all but gone, and he could feel the last of the nausea fading too. He really *was* getting acclimated to the backlash little by little, wasn't he?

"Fine yeah, thanks."

"And your shoulder?" she asked, letting go of him.

Rei lifted his right arm to test it out, noticing only the mildest of discomfort. "Good as new. Your brother seems to know what he's doing."

"Kinda comes with the territory, I think. Once you start training at *that* level, you're bound mess something up now and then."

"Fair enough," Rei agree with a nod, reaching around to feel at the joint. "Hadn't really considered that."

"You should have."

Rei winced, then glanced back with a sheepish grin to find Aria glaring at him.

"Yeah... I know..." he muttered apologetically. "Can I get off with just a slap on the wrist this time, though? Hitting Wainwright was enough of a lesson. Felt like I'd slammed into the side of a *mountain* at light sp—"

But then Rei stopped, his attention stolen away as his frame flared into being without warning.

...

Processing combat information.

...

Calculating.

...

Results:

Strength: Severely Lacking

Endurance: Severely Lacking

Speed: Severely Lacking

Cognition: Severely Lacking

Offense: Severely Lacking

Defense: Severely Lacking

Growth: Not Applicable

...

Checking combat data acquisition.

...

Adequate data acquirement met.

Device initiating adjustments to:

Strength.

Endurance.

Speed.

Cognition.

Offense.

Defense.

...

Processing.

...

Adjustment complete.

Strength has been upgraded from Rank C6 to C7.

Endurance has been upgraded from Rank C5 to C6.

Speed has been upgraded from Rank B1 to B3.

Cognition has been upgraded from Rank C9 to B1

Offense has been upgraded from Rank C7 to C8.

Defense has been upgraded from Rank C7 to C8.

...

Calculating.

...

CAD “Shido” has been upgraded from Rank C9 to B0.

Rei stared, open mouthed. He wasn't sure why he was surprised. If anything, he supposed another 5 minutes or so of fighting might have twitched him straight through to B1 if he added in the upgrades he'd seen since Sectionals already. Still, he'd be so intent of the fight, so intent on making a good impression in front of their trainers—among other factors—that he hadn't paused to consider the implication.

S-Ranked opponents. A pair of them, and each pushing more than two full tiers higher than he'd been at C9, much less the lower true average of his spec. The last time he'd gone toe-to-toe with a difference like that had been against Christopher Lennon, and Aira at Commencement before that. Both times Shido had made *huge* gains. And when those S-Ranked simulations had surrounded him at Sectionals—

No, Rei told himself firmly, allowing himself not to think of that, even if it was evidence. *No*.

“Ooooh boy...”

It was Aria—who he'd been looking at—who caught site of the script in his NOED first. She was squinting at him with an excited gleam in her eye, peering like she

was trying to read the tiny backwards script on his irises, something that seemed to be everyone's first reaction these days when it came to Shido.

"What is it?" she asked eagerly. "Were you and Kalus going at it that whole time? It's gotta be *bonkers* if so..."

Behind her, Catcher looked suddenly intent, and on his other side Rei could practically hear Chancery and Logan going tense.

None of which was missed by their company.

"Colonel, so sorry to butt in, but... It seems like something rather interesting's going on over there."

Through the notification, Rei was unsurprised to find Jasper had noticed the shift in Firesong first, holding up a manicured hand to politely interrupted Guest's ongoing explanation about Temporal Step. Valera Dent's eyes found him next, snapping around to him instantly, with the other officers' and Kent's following immediately.

Among all of them, though, it was the Ivory Shield's omnipotent gaze that drew his own, their black-and-gold pure fragments of that dragging power the woman seemed to be able to turn on at a whim.

"Ward?" von Bor asked almost curiously. "What happened?"

Rei thought quickly. He was still reeling from the upgrade notification—aside from Sectionals, climbing through the Cs had been a *slog* compared to the previous ranks—but he could jump for joy later. Temporal Step was one thing. He wouldn't have been able to keep that quite forever even if he'd wanted to, just like Type Shift before it. Shido's Growth spec was another matter.

Still... The best of misdirections always had a foundation in truth.

"Upgrade notification, ma'am," he answered. "I've never fought outright against S-Ranks before, and my Device's Growth Spec is above average. I've hit B0."

Silver lining to not having jumped to B1, he considered as he saw collective eyebrows raise along with a broad grin split across Dent's prosthetic lower face. If he'd skipped right through a rank, he wasn't sure how he would have explained him—

"B0? Is that is?"

Rei blinked, and to a one every face turned toward von Bor. Whereas most everyone else had looked surprised and pleased, he realized suddenly that the Rook-Class, for her part, seemed almost disappointed.

"Uh... Ma'am?" Wainwright indeed asked. "The kid's a first year... B0 is kinda *nuts*, don't... don't you...?"

Her question trailed away as von Bor raised a hand to silence her.

"My sub-instructors are eager and genuine, Cadet Ward," she addressed Rei with an impassive expression now. "That's good. Very good. I, however, am *old*." She smiled slightly, then. "Meaning you *won't* be dancing around me as easily as you like. My apologies."

Rei swallowed, feeling his palms start to sweat suddenly.

"Uh... Yes... Yes, ma'm," he got out uncertainly, suddenly dreading the next question.

The captain surprised him, though.

"Of course, some things *are* best left in the dark, at least officially." She shrugged slightly but didn't look away from him. "Still, I admit a *little* surprise. I expected a bit more."

Rei decided to keep toeing the line of truth.

"Shido—my Device... It adapts quickly. It's been harder and harder to challenge it."

"Meaning it responds to stimulus."

"It... does. Yes, ma'am." They were getting dangerously close to specifics Rei wasn't interested in airing in present company, so he decided it was time to make an

attempt change tracks. “Just a little more acutely than most other CADs, maybe. We’ve *all* seen a good amount of growth this year.” He gestured around at the five present members of Firesong.

“Yes... You have, haven’t you?” von Bor indeed took them all in in steady succession, then, but despite that Rei for some reason didn’t remotely get the impression he’d succeeded at diverting the conversation. “An *alarming* amount of growth, one could even say. Two first-year Users with rare Abilities that usually only manifest in A-Ranks or above.” The woman’s eyes swept from Catcher to Chancery. “One with an overdeveloped Device for her age.” She looked next to Aria. “And another, well... I think there’s not much need to elaborate on *you* at the moment, Ward.” Her gaze fell on him only briefly before flicking to Logan. “And you, Cadet? Anything of an extraordinary nature to tell us that we aren’t already aware of?”

Logan looked suddenly uncomfortable, his red-black eyes apparently having trouble meeting the Ivory Shield’s boring attention.

His voice, fortunately, was still even as he answered.

“Not yet, ma’am,” he answered, clearly choosing his words carefully.

“Yes... ‘Yet’ being the keyword there, I suspect.” von Bor studied him a moment more, then lifted her cane suddenly to bang it lightly on the steel again. “And that’s nothing to speak of Cadet *Arada*, of course. Oh yes. I’m aware of the girl’s situation.” She offered Rei a hint of a crooked smile when he started in surprise at this. That was more than she gave the others, too, since didn’t even glance around at Guest, Dent, and Maddison Kent as they all looked sharply inward at her. “I’d love to say I’m still well-connected within the ISCM, but the credit for *that* little tidbit belongs to... someone else.”

Rei had just looked passed her to Jasper—whose face hadn’t so much as twitched despite his only being one of many eyes to turn towards her then—when Logan spoke again.

“Wait... What situation?”

Rei stiffened. There was a still, unpleasant moment, and he heard Aria murmur a curse at his left.

“Oh shit...”

He had to work hard not to echo the sentiment.

“Captain von Bor,” Colonel Guest cut in again, almost hurriedly this time. “That’s not something that needs to be—”

“All due respect, Colonel, as far as I’m aware neither I nor either of my sub-instructors is beholden to your gag order” the Ivory Shield rolled over the man so easily he might as well have been yelling into a vacuum, smiling all the while. “Nor am I fond of secrets amongst squad members, much less those under my direct purview.”

“*Captain* von Bor.” The colonel stressed her rank this time, like he wanted to remind her of who the highest officer of the group was. “That is *not* your decision to—”

“Oh yes it.” Again she cut him off, and again she did so without looking away from Firesong. “Have you forgotten I’m not a member of the ISCM anymore? Haven’t been for a long time.”

“You are still bound by the oath you took to the—!”

The Ivory Shield scoffed. It was the first time all evening the facade of the stern, well-meaning grandmother gave, and for a moment—just a moment—Rei thought he saw someone else under the mask. Someone sharper, harder, and even more dangerous.

Then the woman’s composure was back, and she finally looked around at Guest.

“I’m too old, too famous, and too rich to give so much as hoot about the military oath anymore, Colonel.” Her voice was flat, but not unkind. “I understand your logic. I do. There are some things that need to be protected. However—” she turned back towards the squad “—I think I’m safe in assuming that this *particular* team already has some experience keeping all-important secrets to their chest. Don’t you all?”

Before any of them could answer this, however, she was addressing Logan again.

“Cadet Arada and her CAD—Gemela, was it?—experienced an evolution after the incident that I understand landed her in the hospital. She has also developed an Ability.”

In the corner of Rei’s eye he saw Logan blink, then the boy swelled with what might have been pride. Beside him, Chancery looked suddenly excited too, and by Aria he was sure Catcher had opened his mouth, probably to get out a “Way to go *Viv!*” or something of the like. Behind the Ivory Shield, on the other hand, a myriad of very different emotions were playing out. Frustration and anger from Guest, apprehension from Kent, and—oddly—a matching combination of interest and smugness from Dent and Jasper both.

Then von Bor continued before anyone could get a word in.

“A *User-Unique* Ability. The second first-year cadet in the history of the ISCM to ever develop one.” Her eyes fell on Rei again, and once more they seemed to pull at his very soul. “The first, of course, being our own Cadet Ward here.”

The shift in the room was instantaneous. Logan’s every movement stilled to the point that he seemed to have stopped breathing. Catcher and Chancery’s jaws dropped in unison, and with this reveal Guest looked abruptly more resigned than angry. Maddison Kent was glancing nervously from him to the back of von Bor’s head, but once more Dent and Jasper held matching expressions.

They were both watching Firesong intently, the Iron Bishop doing a lesser job of masking her eager study of the five than the fixer.

“User... Unique?” Logan finally managed to get out, his voice tight and uncertain, like he wasn’t sure he’d heard properly. “...Viv?”

“Indeed,” von Bor confirmed simply.

“But... How...? When? How could...?” The Mauler seemed to realize he was struggling to form two words, because he took a breath and straightened his shoulders. His next question came more steadily. “Can I ask what sort of Ability, ma’am?”

The Ivory Shield shrugged. “You can *ask* all you like. As it’s unique to the cadet and Arada is still indisposed, however, no one has anything more than the name.”

“Which is...?”

“Something for her to share with you, as there is no value in my robbing her of that moment, I think.”

Logan hesitated, then nodded.

Chancery, on the other hand, whirled on Rei and Aria.

“You *knew* this?!” she hissed, livid. “You *knew* this, and you didn’t *say* anything?!”

“Cadet *Cashe*.” It was Dent who barked out, bringing the Lancer up short. “Ward and Laurent have both been under directive *not* to divulge any of this. In case you’ve suddenly forgotten how the chain of command works: that means there were following *orders*, Cadet.”

“Ma’am!” Chancery snapped into a salute at the reprimand. “Yes, ma’am!”

Rei, though, didn’t miss the anger lingering in in the tightness of her mouth. Catcher, too, was eyeing him and Aria both sidelong, though Rei thought the Saber’s expression seemed more hurt than anything else.

Can’t blame him, either, Rei considered bitterly, feeling an embarrassed heat in his cheeks as he avoided his teammates’ eyes.

At least *Logan* still seemed too stunned to feel slighted, if even for the moment.

“Regardless, it’s only more excitement to be explored once Arada is back on her feet.” von Bor waved the subject aside, either not seeing—or more likely not caring about—the sudden tension in the room. “But speaking *of* Arada...” She let her hand drop back to her cane, taking the squad in pensively. “You’re good, Firesong. *Very* good. I put you to the task, and you rose to meet it. *All* of you.” She nodded approvingly as she cast her eyes across all of them once more. “I’m confident the sergeant major and second lieutenant agree, too?” The old woman made it a question, offering Laurent and Jetway an opportunity to voice anything to the contrary.

Neither did, and Wainwright even grinned at them.

“If they were all Bs, they might have actually hit me,” she granted them with a chuckle. “That’s definitely something, given the circumstances.”

“Oh?” Jasper cocked her head at the woman’s back, her face a carefully crafted picture of polite confusion. “But I seem to recall that Ward *did* hit you, second lieutenant? Or am I mistaken?”

The S-Rank winced, then shot the fixer a glare over her shoulder. “That doesn’t count! How the hell was I supposed to see him coming when he can *literally teleport!?!?*”

“How odd.” Jasper brought her hand up to tap one finger against her painted lips, continuing to look bemused. “The sergeant major managed to avoid getting hit, somehow...”

“Lady, you’re *really* good at pushing people buttons, aren’t y—?”

Bang.

The sound of von Bor’s cane hitting the floor again snapped Wainwright’s attention back, though Rei could have sworn he heard the woman muttering something about ‘puffed up puppeteers’ under her breath.

“As I was saying...” the Rook-Class continued like there’d been no interruption, still watching Firesong. “You fight well, all of you. However, you’re only the largest part of a whole.” She let her gaze linger on Logan briefly, looking him up and down. “I’ve reviewed your Sectionals footage. It is clear that Cadet Arada is hot-headed and brash, and I’m sure will be the cause of as many headaches in the future as she has been in the past. *However—*” she pressed on as the Mauler, obviously expectedly, opened his mouth to say something “—it is equally clear that the cadet is a fitting addition to this team, particularly when you lack in acute offensive capability without her. At least for the time being.” Rei might have imagined her dark eyes flicking to him, if only for an instant. “For that reason, I’ve no interest in disrupting your training balance more than I have to...”

The old woman contemplated them all for a moment, like she were turning over a decision in her head. After a second or two, she finally looked around again at Guest.

“I’ll need a Duelist, Colonel.” It wasn’t a request so much as a statement, but her tone was polite just the same. “Someone either around their level or skilled enough to temper their combat ability to theirs. They’ll fill in for Arada until she can join us.”

Guest—who was looking more and more worn down—sighed in a defeated sort of way.

“We’ll can take care of that,” he grunted in answer, crossing his arm as he half-glared down at the Rook-Class. “Will you *at least* agree that a gag order should be maintained *outside* of your training hours? The ISC isn’t ready for Ward’s Temporal Step, much less Arada’s situation—whatever it may turn out to be. The public feeds only *just* started to calm down about Type Shift before the fiasco at Sectionals. I have to insist that the squad—and your team—” he narrowed his eyes at Laurent and Jetway in turn “—will *have* to respect my order for the time being, especially if you want a stand-in.”

von Bor seemed to consider this, then nodded.

“Fair enough,” she answered. “Though I would encourage you to figure out how to break that news to the masses sooner rather than later.”

“It’ll get out eventually,” Laurent said by way of agreement as Wainwright nodded along on Ivory Shield’s other side. “Whether you want it to or not.”

“If only it were my decision to make.” Guest’s words came out as more than a growl than he’d probably intended, because he coughed into a fist as though to clear his throat before continuing. “But alright. Firesong has already been completing their Team Training days with another first year. Cadet Martin. She’s good, and a Duelist like Ara—”

“No!”

Rei, Logan, and Catcher all spoke at once. Even Aria and Chancery—who hadn't said anything—looked suddenly concerned, and among the group of adults Dent was frowning at the Colonel.

“Excuse me, *Cadets?*” Guest asked in a low, hard voice, glaring around at them all.

For once, though, Rei found himself unable to quail under the man's heavy gaze, snapping instead into a quick salute as his eyes found the familiar spot over the Colonel's shoulder. Maybe it was the fact that—by comparison—Guest's bearing as a *Pawn*-Class User didn't seem to hold a candle to even von Bor's repressed presence.

More likely, though, was that *this* was a place where Rei thought he wouldn't have let himself yield even if he'd been standing in front of the Gateknocker himself.

“Sir, we very much appreciate Martin's stepping in during class,” he answered quickly, standing rigidly at attention. “Her volunteering to join has been incredibly helpful. If we could request someone else outside of that, though...?”

“She's a talented Duelist, ranks in the average of your squad, and has demonstrated responsibility as one of the three first-year squad leaders,” Guest answered firmly. “She fits the combat criteria, and can be trusted with what she would learn in these extra training courses. She's an ideal fit.”

“She's not Viv...” Rei heard Logan mutter at his right.

Most unfortunately, the colonel heard him, sharp eyes turning on the Mauler in a flash.

“She is not, no, Cadet Grant.” His glare did not soften even when Logan, too, snapped to attention. “But given Arada's current state is *the entire point of this conversation*, that is hardly a factor.”

“Colonel, maybe they have someone else in mind?” Dent eased into the conversation placatingly, looking between Rei and her superior officer. “If they have concerns about Martin...”

She let the point hang, and Guest frowned around at her.

“Who else would be a better fit?” he asked sharply. “As I said, she’s been working with Firesong for over a week already, and meets the criteria.”

“She does sound like an ideal match.” Wainwright had one eyebrow raised as she took in Rei and the others. “What’s the catch, Firesong?”

Rei hesitated, thinking fast. He didn’t want to say exactly what he was thinking. That he wasn’t a fan of the overeagerness he’d been sensing from Laquita Martin in class wasn’t a good enough reason, at least not to Guest. The colonel *was* correct, after all. As Red Crown’s squad leader, she *was* ideal, and even came with experience working with them—and therefore some of the complexity of Shido’s unique characteristics—already. If anything, there wasn’t anyone who *was* a better fit, even if they all didn’t want to give her the opportunity to—

There was a ping, and a message popped up in Rei’s own NOED. Surprised, he glanced at it quickly, and was taken aback to find that it had been sent from... Aria?

Wondering what in the MIND *that* could possibly be about, Rei dropped his gaze to the ground in an attempt to hide his momentary distraction. Opening the message, a single word popped up in his vision.

A single *name*.

Rei stared. At first he couldn’t believe she would even make the suggestion. Then he actually considered it.

By the time anyone noticed he wasn’t paying attention anymore, he was kicking himself that he hadn’t thought of it first.

“I asked you a question, Cadet. Conversation boring you already?”

It was Wainwright who’d caught him staring through his NOED at the ground, and he straightened up with a jerk to find her eyeing him.

“No, ma’am,” he answered in a hurry. “I was just—”

“I’m thinking you got into his head, Captain” Kalus Laurent said with a chuckle, putting his hands on his hips and grinning at Rei as he addressed von Bor. “Maybe he’s dissapointed in his own performance.”

“No, sir, I actually had a—” Rei tried to get in again, but the Ivory Sheild cut across him next.

“That so?” the old woman asked, banging her cane once more on the projection plating. “Well, can’t say I blame you, Ward. It was a good fight and all that, but like I said, I admit I expected more from your Device...”

Rei opened his mouth a third time to try to get out the name Aria had given him, but found his mouth suddenly dry. Out of nowhere, von Bor was taking him in in an all new way, her black eyes bright. She seemed abruptly taller, too, her shoulders straight and a head a little higher.

“Ah shit...” Catcher muttered from behind him, the first to voice the exact feeling Rei had building in his gut.

All at once, it felt like he were staring down a mile-wide meteorite as it thundered silently out of the sky towards him a fiery hellstorm of stone and pure, unstoppable power.

“You know... That gives me an idea.” The Ivory Sheild’s voice had a low, energetic edge to it that Rei wasn’t sure he liked. “We can discuss the issue with this ‘Martin’ girl after. While you lot are still warmed up...” She lifted one hand to gesture at the gold-on-black of her combat suit. “I don’t really want to have changed into this for no reason, do I?”

“Ah *shit*...” Aria and Chancery both echoed this time while Logan only groaned in a worried sort of way as light flashed in the old woman’s eyes and the field came to life under their feet once again.

...

Processing combat information.

...

Calculating.

...

Results:

Strength: Severely Lacking

Endurance: Severely Lacking

Speed: Severely Lacking

Cognition: Severely Lacking

Offense: Severely Lacking

Defense: Severely Lacking

Growth: Not Applicable

...

Checking combat data acquisition.

...

Adequate data acquirement met.

Device initiating adjustments to:

Endurance.

Cognition.

Defense.

...

Processing.

...

Adjustment complete.

Endurance has been upgraded from Rank C6 to C7.

Cognition has been upgraded from Rank B1 to B2.

Defense has been upgraded from Rank C8 to C9.

...

Calculating.

...

CAD "Shido" has been upgraded from Rank B0 to B1.

"...rd. ...War...d. ... *Ward!*"

"Gaaaah!"

Rei came too with a hitched gasp, rising out of the black so violently he flailed as he jerked upright into a sitting position. Before him Kalus Laurent—who'd apparently been in the middle of shaking him in an effort to wake him up—stepped away with a chuckle.

"You good?" the sergeant major asked him. "I gotta get the others up too."

"Uh... Y-yeah... I think?" Rei stammered, struggling with a dizzying mix of confusion and dread as he nodded shakely.

"You *think?*"

"I-I'm good," he corrected, hardly any more firmly. It seemed to be enough, though, because with another laugh Laurent turned jogged off, leaving Rei to look around as he forced himself to breath, forced himself to calm down.

If his heartrate got any, he was pretty sure it would have to start getting measure with four digits.

The green, sweeping plains of the Grasslands they had fought on were gone. He was sitting once more on the cold steel of the projection plating, Shido having recalled itself to his wrists already. The rest of the squad's Device had done the same, everyone scattered so far across the Team Battle area they might as well have been standing around a bomb when it had gone off.

Which wasn't that far from the truth, Rei thought, awareness leaking back as he squinted about, trying to will awareness back into place.

Aria was the only one still relatively nearby—some 15 feet of to his left—but she was coughing in a pained sort of way as she pushed herself unsteadily up to sit sideways on the floor, red hair having come completely loose of its bun to fall in curtain over her face. Catcher was probably 20 yards beyond her—still unconscious, with a grinning Wainwright holding his limp form up with one hand while repeatedly slapping him across the face with the other—and Chancery and Logan were at the very edge of the silver circle, having probably hit the outer wall of the field after being blasted away by the hits that had knocked them out.

Yeah... a bomb was an accurate description.

Bang.

The sound of the cane striking the floor sent a shiver up Rei's spine in a way it most *hadn't* all of... what... *5 minutes* before, depending on how long they'd been out? Scrambling to his feet, he whirled to find von Bor standing just out of arms reach behind him, her back hunched once again, but the gold in her eyes shining in the basement lights as she took him in.

“Yes... as Laurent and Wainwright said: Not bad. Not bad at all.” The Ivory Shield was nodding as she spoke, though she didn't look around at the rest of the squad while Laurent and Dent—the captain having clearly also jumped down from the descending observation disc—bent over Chancery and Logan to check on them. “Your lack of experience is obvious—painfully so, truth be told—but you all somewhat make up for it with grit and spirit. Your teamwork is good, too—at least for first years—but I don't think I'm mistaken in assuming you've been doing most of your extra training against each other? Or simulations?”

“Uh... Yes, ma’am.” Rei was still reeling, the last few minutes a painful blur of disbelief and confusion, like a fever dream that had been a little *too* realistic. “Mostly... Mostly each other.”

“Yes yes, well... We’ll be changing that.” The woman still hadn’t looked away from him, her gaze peircing now, like she was waiting for something.

After a second Rei realized what, because that was the same moment he noticed the blinking notification in the corner of his hub.

“Oh *man*...” he couldn’t stop himself from mumbling as he seleted it, somehow both shocked and yet totally unsurprised when the upgrade scripted itself out across his frame. Beyond the text, von Bor looked to be holding back a smile, but she waited patiently as he read, having to stop himself from shaking his head.

Half a rank. *5 minutes* of combat, and Shido had seen seen improvements in 3 more specs, pushing it over the edge to B1. Rei had to wonder what would have happened if they’d kept going, but he also doubted his body—much less his freinds’—could have tolerated any more of the beating von Bor had already dealt them. Everything ached already, and he suspected it would only be worse by morning. And that had been with the woman clearly dialing her Strength and Speed down pretty much as far as Rei thought they could probably go...

A half-diffused bomb, Rei thought with a shiver as he closed out of his frame to meet the captain’s expectant gaze again. *A nuke that decided on it’s own not to level the city.*

A nuke he knew was waiting for him to speak.

“B1, ma’am,” he told the woman what she wanted to hear. “Three spec upgrades. Pushed Shido over the edge.”

The Ivory Shield nodded slowly, a satisfied gleam in her eye. “I’m assuming that’s unlikely to be the constant curve of your improvement?” she asked, glancing down at Shido’s bands around his wrists. “We recieved a breakdown of your ranking since your Assignement Exam. Given you were under-level for your class for most of the first

semester—and training with some of this lot for much of that—” she took a hand off her cane to wave at the others as Catcher finally came to and Aria, Chancery, and Logan got whoozily to their feet “—there would have been a much steeper climb without some plateuing.”

Rei nodded. He still wasn't willing to give the woman what she really wanted—much less Kalus Laurent, Wainwright, and *Jasper* most of all—but there was no dancing around this particular bush given how obvious it would be pretty much immediately.

“Yes, ma'am. I don't know what the dropoff will be like—I've never trained against S-Ranked opponents—but I imagine it'll be steep. Fighting against the rest of the squad eventually ended up with just short of a flatline, though I do still occassionally seen an upgrade.”

“I suspect your ‘occasionally’ is on par with everyone else's ‘regular’, Ward,’ von Bor told him with a snort, one finger tapping against the top of her cane. “But just the same, that's good to know.” She narrowed her eyes at him, though. “Then again... You thought it best to continue to train with them? After this ‘flatline?’”

Rei didn't hesitate, bringing himself at ease before the Rook-Class as his shock finally ebbed enough for him to realize he'd been standing causually before her. Retired she might be, but she was still a superior officer, of a rank with Valera Dent, in fact. “Yes, ma'am. I'm of the opinion there's more to being a good User than how high my numbers are. Training with my team—especially against Cadet Laurent—has confirmed this.”

To his suprise, von Bor smiled at that. Actually, truly *smiled*.

“You know, Ward... If that's the kind of mentality you're already bringing to the field, I think you and I might get along just fine,” the old woman told him, the tapping of her cane head ceasing.

Rei, taked aback, was struggling to find a way to answer this when Rama Guest saved him the effort.

“I think that’s enough for the evening, Captain.” The colonel spoke loudly enough for all to hear as the observation disc finally touched down behind von Bor, depositing him, Maddison Kent, and Jasper onto the projection plating with the rest of them. “Assuming this session was as informative as you were hoping, I’m going to ask you to let Firesong get back to their dorms to rest. They do have a week of classes ahead of them.”

“And more than that, now,” Wainwright added cheerily, half-supporting, half-dragging a bleary-eyed Catcher over as Kalus Laurent and Dent did much the same with Chancery and Logan. Aria was the only one other than Rei who seemed able to stand on her own, and even she looked a bit unsteady on her feet as she suffered her way over to stand beside him again.

“I give us a week.” she muttered just loud enough for him to hear. “Two *tops*.”

Rei frowned sidelong at her. “Before we... What?” he whispered back through the corner of his mouth. “Don’t feel like we got hit by a train?”

“Before we die,” she groaned quietly, wincing as she brought herself up straight before von Bor, Guest, Kent, and Jasper.

Rei wanted to laugh at that.

Considering it, though, he thought it best not to jinx the possibility.

“Firesong, you’re dismissed for the night,” von Bor indeed let them go with a nod over her shoulder at the colonel. “Good work today. As I believe has been explained to you, the additional training with your sub-instructors has been moved to mornings. 0600, Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. Monday through Saturday evenings, though, you’ll be with us.” She smirked a little, looking the squad over as Catcher, Chancery, and Logan finally reached them, all three only just managing to stand on their own—though Catcher still look like he was in another world. “I would have made it *every* evening, but apparently there’s regulations about training breaks for cadets.”

“Should be fun!” Wainwright chimed in again, coming to stand beside von Bor.

“Very,” Kalus Laurent agreed, grinning at them all as he moved to the old woman’s other side. “Looking forward to it.”

Unfortunately for him, he’d apparently come off just a little *too* cheery for a certain little sister’s taste.

“Ma’am.” Aria spoke to von Bor, but it was her older brother that she was glaring at. “Permission to have a word with the Sergeant Major in private, ma’am?”

At the Ivory Shield’s elbow, the elder Laurent blanched a little.

“I don’t think that’s necessary,” he said quickly, his voice abruptly an octave too high. “You guys are tired, and I’m sure we’ll have plenty of time to catch up at a later—”

“Permission granted,” von Bor rolled over him as smoothly as she’d done everybody else that evening, looking around at the man with a dissapointed air. “I do believe I’d instructed you to let Cadet Laurent know you were coming so it *wouldn’t* be a shock, Sergeant Major. Did I not?”

Laurent—looking *very* nervous, now—glanced uneasily from the old woman to Aria and back again.

“I-I thought it would make a nice suprise.” He tried for a grin, though not quiet managing it. “Haven’t seen each other in a while. Thought it would be fun!”

“Ma’am.” Aria’s glare could have murdered as she continued to address von Bor. “Permission to drag the Sergeant Major away by force?”

“Now hold on just a—!”

“Granted,” von Bor cut in again, sounding almost bored as she looked back to Rei and the others. “Just keep him in one piece, Cadet. He *is* going to be important for your training regime.”

Aria moved so quickly she’d obviously engaged her Speed spec. Her brother—either too distract to react or thinking better of doing so—let out a grunt of pain as she took him firmly by the elbow and started dragging him towards the hall.

“Wait for me before heading back?” she asked Rei—smiling a little too sweetly—as they passed him, Catcher, Chancery, and Logan. “This won’t take too long.”

“Yooooou got it!” Rei replied at once. He’d seen that expression before, and there wasn’t a force *any* planet in the ISC that could have convinced him to answer differently.

Without a word the group—even Guest—watched the two siblings reach the hallways and vanish around the corner, Kalus Laurent sounding like he was at once trying to explain himself and plead for mercy all the while. When they were gone, von Bor brought them to attention again.

“Fun as that was, as I said, you’re dismissed, Firesong.” She banged her cane one last time. “Laurent, Wainwright, and I will see you here tomorrow at 1900, and we’ll *really* get things started.”

“*That* wasn’t started??” Catcher groaned from behind Rei, though fortunately not loud enough to be heard.

The promise of worse than they’d just gone through over the last half-hour, though, wasn’t what concerned Rei in the moment.

Nor Logan, apparently.

“Ma’am,” the Mauler started quickly before anyone could stop him. “About Cadet Arada...?”

von Bor blinked at him for a moment, then frowned.

“Ah yes,” she murmured. “I’d forgotten. That *was* a rather vehement effort to avoid partnering with this ‘Martin’. I’m curious... As to what the issue is?”

“Martin is... fine, ma’am,” Logan answered carefully. “She’s just...” He hesitated, trying to find the right words.

Chancery, on the other hand, had apparently in enough pain not to care much for pleasantries.

“She’s a little... overenthusiastic, ma’am,” the Lancer took over.

“In what way?”

“Let’s just say she probably wouldn’t be too upset if Viv’s—err... if Cadet Arada’s absence resulted in a more *long term* opportunity for her.”

“Aaaah.” The captain nodded in understanding. Behind her, Guest was frowning again, but he seemed to have decided to let the conversation take its own course.

Fine by Rei, who was chewing on one cheek, working up the nerve.

“You got someone else in mind?” Wainwright was the one to ask, corssing her lithe arms over her chest again.

Rei thought he heard Logan and Chancery look at each other behind him, but apparently they hadn’t thought that far ahead, becuase neither answered.

This was not appreciated by the Ivory Shield.

“If you are going to raise concerns, I expect you to also present solutions,” the old woman told the pair of them sternly. “Merely highlighting problems does not moving anything forward, in life *or* on the field. I hear your concerns, but if you have no suggestions other than Martin, than as Colonel Dent has said she *does* sound like the best candidate for the job, given the circum—”

Rei didn’t know if he’d ever been more brave—or more stupid—in his life when he raised his hand to interrupt the woman, silently thanking Aria for the idea and Logan and Chancery for the time to gather his nerve as he did.

“Ma’am...” he started slowly. “Does... Would Cadet Arada’s stand-in have to be a Duelist... strictly?”

von Bor turned her glare on him, but didn’t reprimand him for the intrusion.

“If we want to minimize interuption of squad tactics and training, yes, Cadet.” She was watching him carefully, though. “We want someone who could fill Arada’s roll as ideally as possible, obviously.”

Rei—happy for any reason *not* to look Guest in the eye given he could feel the colonel glaring at him—nodded quickly.

“Meaning... Theoretically...” He had to work to get the words out. “Any duelist-wielder with the skills to fill Cadet Arada’s position could do the trick...? And especially if they’ve already worked with Firesong before...?”

There was a second of silence, most of the adults watching him intently, clearly not following.

And then Valera Dent started to laugh.

Chapter 20

PLACEHOLDER

-PLACEHODER

Candice “Dice” Meyer had once heard somewhere that—in long gone centuries—school students irritated with their studies would pick up their textbooks—their actual printed, *paper* textbooks—and chuck them across the room as a means of venting frustration. Most any other time, Dice would probably have thought the idea silly, even wasteful. Paper was valuable, so the thought of potentially *damaging* a book made her wince. What was more, what if the student lost their page? Wouldn’t it be a pain to find it again? She couldn’t imagine the tedium of sifting through that many words just to figure out where you’d left off.

Then again... At the moment Dice could only regret that technology had advanced so far as to make such a healthy outlet largely impossible.

“Uuuurrrggghhhh!” she let out in an annoyed groan, swiping a hand across her vision to scatter the dozen-or-so molecular formulas, mathematical functions, and tedious text blocks she’d been reviewing on the living room wall across from her.

“Remind me: *Why* do we need to know the average rate of psuedo-organic regeneration across the different ranks??”

From her lap, a gravelly chuckle answered.

“Someone gets hurt in the field, it’s good to have an idea how long it’ll take for them to recover if it’s healable. You can’t always count on being able to get a squadmate back to base.”

Looking down, Dice stuck her tongue out.

“I wasn’t looking for a good, logical answer, you know?”

“I know,” Christopher Lennon—ace of the Galens Institute, A9 monster of a third year, and her munchkin of a boyfriend—answered her with a grin from where he had his head in her lap, blue eyes on the ceiling above her where his own study materials were pulled up for review across the smart-glass surface.

They’d claimed one of the two couches that took up most of the common area of Dice’s suite, a space not all that different from the dorms they’d spent their first and second years living in other than being a bit more spacious. Her housemates were all out, either getting in some late-afternoon training or with their own study groups, so it was just the two of them for the time being. That suited her just fine.. Lately it had been getting harder and harder for her and Chris to spend time together. Classes always took up part of the day, but with this being their third and final year of school—and both their teams having qualified for Globals later in the semester—training felt like it was taking up more and more of their already-limited free hours with every passing week. And that was *her* schedule. Chris’ was even *more* nightmarish. He had additional Dueling practice with Valera Dent once week, for one thing, and Steelbound—the squad he led—was a favorite for a potential Systems and maybe even *Intersystems* championship that summer, meaning they did more hours in the training center than any other group Dice knew of. On top of that, it seemed like every other day he had to take one meeting or another with some family or company representative—from Astra and beyond

alike—inquiring about his interest in sponsorship. He'd been turning them down left and right, always saying he was holding out “for the right fit”.

That had made Dice laugh out loud more than once after he'd shown her some of the offers a few of the parties had brought to the table, and almost faint outright when he'd turned down the *million credits* Veragoth Industries—a weapons manufacturer out of Sol—had included in theirs.

Still, Chris knew what he was doing. That Dice believed wholeheartedly. It was one of her—admittedly many—favorite things about the guy, right alongside his gentle demeanor and how easily he laughed, at least around her. Despite his reputation—no, his *legend*, at this point—he was one of the best people she'd ever met, with a smile that always made her feel like the luckiest girl in any room.

Of course, now and then none of that held a candle to where her head went whenever he switched on what she—very privately—called his “Lasher mode” out of the blue, but she wasn't about to say *that* out loud, was she?

“What's up?”

Dice blinked, realizing she'd been staring down at her boyfriend without meaning to.

“Nothing,” she said quickly, putting a hand on his chest and peering at him like she was studying his face. “Just taking in your ugly mug.”

In answer, Chris only snorted. “Brave of you to say that, considering.”

“Considering what?”

“Considering who's the bigger moron? The one with the ugly mug, or the one who voluntarily decided to *date* said mug.”

Dice laughed at that, thought a little half-heartedly. The truth was it was a fact that Chris looked a bit different from most other Users. One of the many incredible things about Devices was the steady genetic correction they applied to their weilders, a physiological manipulation of chromosomal DNA that over time not only led to

improved metabolism, peak blood-oxygen efficiency, and the like, but other advantages as well. Symmetry, for one thing, of the body and face alike. Add that to being taller, trimmer, *and* more muscular than the average civilian, and by the time they graduated a *lot* of CAD Users looked like they could end up on the cover of any fashion magazine one day. Many of them *did*, actually, Dice among them, having caved to requests to do just that for several local brands when her family—who were always angling for a way to lure her out of the military—had pulled strings to get her the ‘opportunities’, as they called them.

Still, there were exceptions, Chris being chief among them.

He wasn’t ugly. Not by any definition of the word, and Dice would quietly cheerfully have throat punched anyone she overheard saying otherwise. Chris just didn’t fit what people’s expectation of Users were. For one thing he was shorter than pretty much every other cadet at school—other than Reidon Ward, who it was rumored was quickly catching up—with his 5’10”-ish frame a good inch or so shorter than even most of the girls on campus, and *3* shorter than Dice. For another, his face was softer, rounder than most, his cheeks having stubbornly held onto some of the fat that the other students largely lost in their first semester at school, if not before. His shoulders were narrow, too, and he often used his silver-grey dreads to hide his eyes, something some of their classmates had mistaken as reclusiveness early on. All of it made him stand out almost as the runt of any crowd, especially when he walked out onto the field at the head of group like Steelbound.

People learned otherwise pretty damn quick.

To be fair, Dice had had to have that lesson, too, though it hadn’t taken even a year of knowing him before she’d started seeing him as the handsomest man in the room. They’d even been going out since before Ouroboros had evolved into the *beast* it was now, which she suspected Chris was silently grateful for. Not that she could blame him.

Where he was headed, people you could trust to truly have your best interest at heart were probably few and far between...

“Seriously. Do have something between my teeth?”

Dice blinked again, finding herself meeting Chris’ blue eyes, his frame now closed, his entire attention on her.

Lifting one splayed hand, Dice covered his face and half pushing it away from her.

“Hey!” Chris’ exclamation was muffled against her palm as he flailed in a momentary attempt not to fall off the couch. “Leggo!”

Dice grinned, but she let him pull her hand away.

“Sorry,” she told him. “I was just thinking about how lucky you were.”

“Oh, how modest of you,” he grunted, steadying himself back on the cushions before playfully glaring up at her.

“Hey! I’m told I’m pretty hot, you know!”

“Your fan feeds doesn’t count as an unbiased opinion, babe.”

“Says the guy with so many *different* fan feeds that they’ve been known to go to war over what the *exact* shade of blue your eyes are...”

They bickered pleasantly like that for a while, both more than happy to snatch up the welcome break from studying. It felt good, just spending time together. Felt nice. If she was honest with herself, the passing of time had started to weight on Dice, every week scratching a little harder at old anxieties she’d long since put to bed.

Their third year... Their last at Galens. Chris was going on to the SCTs, and she was going to follow.

No matter what, she promised herself, probably for the hundredth time that year already.

It didn’t take much for Dice shake off the brief flare of long-gone worries. There’d been a time when it wouldn’t have been so easy, when the self-doubt and comparison had weighed on her like chains. She’d begun to see what Chris was going to become

early on, maybe even before anyone else. Proximity had offered her that privilege, as well as that stress. That had been when the claws had first gotten hold of her, the hand that had been a twisting force in her gut for almost a year after they started dating. It's wrenching had only redouble when Ouroborus' true form had manifested, and again when he'd mastered the basics of the Device's complicated nature within barely two months of the evolution, having spent hours and hours and *hours* every night for weeks on end on his own in the training rooms, working on figuring out the patterns and movements and momentum needed to make the unique weapons work.

Dice snorted softly to herself, thinking back on it, resting an elbow on Chris' shoulder to plop her chin in the palm of her hand, fingers of the other drumming lightly against his chest.

"Whhheeeere'd you go?"

Glancing down at her boyfriend, she gave him half a shrug before offering only a muttered, "Just thinking."

"About?"

"About how we've come a long way. Both of us."

Chris gave her an odd look. "What brought that on?"

"Not sure." Dice offered a fuller shrug this time, ending her thrumming of his chest in favor of playing with a small hole in his ratty, white sleeping shirt. She'd have to remember to offer to fix that for him later. "We've been busy. Both of us. Training, class, all that. I haven't seen you as much as I'd like, and I guess I was just thinking about how that's a good thing, in a way."

"Oh?"

She nodded, considering for moment.

Then she sat up straight, stretching as she she did.

"I used to be so *stressed* about us," she got out through a yawn. "You remember?"

“Hey.” Chris raised his own hand to her forehead, middle finger cocked back and at the ready. “Don’t make me flick you. Them’s old worries. No need to go digging up the dark days.”

Dice snickered, finishing her stretch to shove his hand away with a grin. “Down, boy. I’m not Just reminiscing. Better way to spend the time then *this* crap.” She waved at the regeneration formulas again.

Chris didn’t look convinced.

“I’m *not*,” Dice repeated with a roll of her eyes, dropping her hands back to his chest. “I almost made top four at Sectionals this year!”

“And you would have if you hadn’t had shit luck,” Chris assured her firmly. “Your last match was in a muddy Flood Zone *and* Williams has Third Eye. Reduced mobility *and* elimination of most of your attack speed advantage. Pretty much the *worst* matchup for your type you could have gotten. If you’d had a better field or a different opponent, you definitely could have—”

“*Chris*,” Dice cut her boyfriend off with a laugh, covering his mouth again to stop him rambling on in her defence. “I *know*. I’m not dissapointed! I’m going to Globals! And with luck, I’m going with you to Systems after that! I am *so* not dissapointed.”

Chris tried to say something, but it came out unintelligible against her palm.

“Sorry, what?” she asked, pulling her hand away.

“I said ‘No jinxing,’” he repeated with a snort. “You don’t *know* if I’m going to Sys—”

Pop.

“Owe!” Chris yelped, both hands flying up to protect his forehead. “What was *that* for??”

“You know *damn* well what that was for,” Dice growled, but she had to hide a smile as she raised her *own* primed finger, a second flick at the ready. “Taste of your own

medicine. If you're gonna give *me* a hard time about an *old* lack of confidence, you better *bet* I'm gonna throw it right back at you when you start saying stupid stuff like that."

"I'm just saying, there's no guarantee that—"

Bending down, Dice kissed him, cutting him off again.

"Shut up, dummy," she said with a light laugh, breaking away again and raising a hand to make a talking motion. "Yeah, yeah. There's 'no guarantee', blah blah blah." She raised an eyebrow at him. "Just like there was 'no guarantee' that Orouborus was going to manifest something special when you complained about it in first year. Just like there was 'no guarantee' that you were going to Systems—then *Intersystems*—last year. And just like you *keep* stressing about there being 'no guarantee' you'll break into the S-Ranks before the summer."

Chris glowered up at her, crossing his arms over his chest.

"There *is* no guarantee," he insisted. "And stop bringing up the S-Rank stuff. I stress out about it *one time* and—"

"Babe," Dice graced him with what she thought was her best sympathetic look. "You stress out about it so often my *suitemates* have started asking me if you're okay."

Chris froze at that, looking suddenly mortified.

"... Wait... *Actually?*" he grunted after a second.

"Actually," Dice confirmed with a grim little nod. Then she grinned and bent down to kiss him again. "It's becoming a thing, and it's dumb. You know it, I know it—" she waved a hand around at the bedrooms doors, all of them closed except for hers "—*they* know it..."

Chris didn't say anything to that, but he didn't meet her eye either, clearly thinking.

"Sorry," he muttered eventually. "Guess it's been bugging me more than I thought. Silverston and Wén are definitely going to be Ss by Inters. Maybe Alvarez and Hyōng too. If I don't make it..."

He let the concern hang, but Dice only shrugged again.

“Then you’ll look even cooler when you kick all their asses as an A9. But you *are* gonna make it. Hell, maybe you’ll even make *Bishop* before the summer, who knows?”

She snickered again as he looked around sharply, horrified.

“Dice, do *not* put that shit out in the universe! Come on!”

“Sorry, sorry.” She waved his terror away with a laugh. “Couldn’t help myself.” Then, though, she looked down at him again, taking him in more genuinely this time.

“To be fair... I got this from you, you know?”

“The unending capacity for brattiness?”

“No, *jerk*,” Dice snorted, and gave him another little shove. “The *overwhelming* belief in the person I care about the most. Even to the point of annoyance.”

She could have sworn—*sworn*—she saw Chris’ dark cheeks redden ever so slightly.

“It was easy with you,” he grumbled, not meeting her eye again. “You were the only one who didn’t think you were good enough. Everyone else knew.”

“Sure, I get that *now*. Fat lot of help it did me fresh out of prep school, though.”

It was Chris’ turn to roll his eyes.

“I’ve told you like a *thousand* times. Just cause you weren’t part of the summer training program—”

“Yeah, yeah, yeaaaaah...” Dice smiled again, a little more mischievously now as she bent over her boyfriend and stopped him with a single finger across his lips this time. “Tell you what. *You* stop changing the subject when I call you dumb for worrying, and *I*—” she brought her mouth slowly closer to his “—will think of a *much* better way to distract ourselves from studying. Deal?”

Chris didn’t even hesitate.

“Deal,” he answered firmly, gaze suddenly ablaze, arms already moving around her body to pull her closer.

Her hair had just started to spill across his chest and neck, lips hardly an inch from his, when Chris' NOED lit up. His eyes flicked to the notification once, probably out of habit. Just once.

And then he sat up so fast it was only the fact that Dice's Speed was the *one* spec she had higher than his that let her avoid their heads slamming together with dangerous force.

"*WOAH!*" she exclaimed, blindsided as the steel frame of the couch creaked in protest against the sudden momentum under them. "What was that f—?!"

But then she stopped. First because Chris' hand—muscled iron now—clamped around her wrist in silent plea for silence.

Then because she saw the script playing across the corner of his eye she could see.

It was the habit of probably any third year, particularly in the final semester of school. A message outside of class hours—or even *inside*, sometimes—could mean so many things, good and bad. A sponsorship meeting or offer. A special invitation to perform an exhibition match. Notice of their approval as an SCT fighter.

Notice of their drafting as a front-line soldier...

"What is it?" Dice asked after a silence, putting her hand over his where it was still wrapped around her arm. She was surprised Chris was staring with mouth open at the block of text, writing that looked so tiny to her but likely took up his much of his field of view. His surprised expression brought on more than a little concern. It took a *lot* to shake her usually indomitable boyfriend. "Is it another sponsorship invite? I doubt anybody is going to beat a *million* credits."

He didn't seem to hear her.

"What in the *MIND*...?" he muttered instead, still staring.

She gave him another few seconds, then lost patience.

"*Chris*," she repeated, a touched peeved now as she shook off his hand in favor of poking him pointedly in the shoulder. "What *is it*?"

He blinked and seemed to come back to himself, but didn't look around at her as he answered. "Rei," he grunted. "I've got a script that let's me know whenever his CAD ranks up."

That surprised Dice. "You can do that?"

Finally Chris glanced around at her, maybe a little sheepishly. "Uh... Yes. Well... Technically."

Dice narrowed her eyes at him, suspecting where this was going. "'Technically'...?"

"Well... it's not like you're *supposed* to be able to, but—"

"But you tweaked your NOED's hardcoding to access the public database API." Dice sighed, wishing she was surprised. "I *told* you you should *stop* doing that. One of these days it's gonna get you in trouble."

"Actually it's a scraper bot that just targets his front-facing feed page." Chris was reading the notification again. "So theoretically I haven't done any *actual* modification to the..."

"Babe. I *will* tell all your friends you purr like a kitten when I play with your hair. Get to the point."

That got his full attention again.

"You wouldn't..."

"*Chris*. Get to the *point*."

"Right. Getting to the point." He closed out of the notification to look at her fully. "I heard Rei was on light training since the Sectional's shit-show, so I wasn't surprised that he hadn't notched passed C9 yet." He reached up and tapped the side of his temple. "He just did, though."

"And?" Dice didn't follow. She'd heard—and *seen*—enough of Reidon Ward at this point to no longer be surprised at his rate of growth. "He's probably back on a regular training schedule. Didn't seem like he'd broken anything when we saw him after the match at—"

“He’s B1,” Chris interrupted her, meeting her eyes meaningfully. “Either he skipped again—right over *B0* this time—or passed through it quick. Either way... He’s B1.”

That got her attention. She—just like the rest of the world, she was pretty sure—hadn’t missed the jump Ward and his CAD had made after his field had been hacked at Sectionals. Half-a-dozen S-Ranked simulations had attacked him together, tearing into him all at once with what had for all intents and purposes been phantom-called blades. It had been horrifying to watch, and she’d heard a rumor that Ward—and Laurent, too—had had a hard time getting back on the field after that. Not that she blamed them. Who wouldn’t?

But... horrible as it had been... it had also pushed the first year from C7 straight to C9, a feat that had never before been seen in the history of the ISCM. It had been done in the *lower* ranks before, sure. Seeing leaps in the Fs and Es from User with decent Growth specs wasn’t totally unheard of. But in the Cs? Never.

And now he’d done it again through low Bs?

Dice was abruptly very worried. “Is he okay? He didn’t get attacked on campus, did he?”

“Asking him right now.” Sure enough, the fingers of Chris’ left hand were already moving as he typed out a message. “I heard the MIND itself patched the back door that got used for the hack. I bet it would have firewalled Galens too, just in case. So hopefully it’s not—”

But then he stopped again, and for a second time Dice saw a notification flash up in his frame.

“Speak of the devil,” Chris muttered before she could ask. “He just messaged me.”

Dice bit her tongue, holding back the further demands that immediately popped into her head. Instead she forced herself to watch Chris open the message and read, noticing only that it seemed like a much lengthier block of text this time.

It didn't help that her boyfriend's blue eyes grew wide as fists as they flew across the lines of the message, then scrolled back up to the top to read it again.

Then, finally, he closed out of his frame, and for a long time simply gaped at the closest wall, apparently at a loss for words.

After almost 30 seconds of silence, Dice couldn't help herself.

"Chris...?" She couldn't keep herself from half-whispering, reaching out to tug lightly at the sleeve of his shirt.

This time though, while Chris kept staring at nothing, he did open his mouth to answer.

"Uh... I don't think making S-Rank is gonna be a problem anymore..." he got out hoarsely.

Dice blinked at that, not following.

"How so...?" she asked slowly, studying him. Yes, it indeed took a *lot* to shake her usually indomitable boyfriend.

Which was why the fact that Chris' expression was hovering somewhere between utter bewilderment and total wonder was more than a little alarming.

"Because... If I'm right... I'm pretty sure the kid just solved that problem for me..."

CHAPTER 21

PLACEHOLDER

-PLACEHOLDER

Time had very little meaning for Viv, a reality that was made utterly ironic by the fact that she felt like it had been that way for a while now. There were moments—in

that strange world between waking and unconsciousness that she kept drifting in and out of—where she thought should could only have been under for hours, while there were others where she was aware it had to have been days, if not weeks. Early on, these latter instances had often been paired with the fear, with that desperate desire to rise, to wake, to climb out of the depths of the warm, welcoming darkness, as comfortable and safe as it felt. The green light came back, swimming around her in shafts like rays of light through water. She would start to fight, start to force herself to ascend.

But then always did that flash of white in the corner of her eye show itself, as did that cool, calm voice that had taken her some time to recognize. It coaxed her back, sometimes willingly, sometimes forcefully, telling her it wasn't time yet, wasn't time.

And so, eventually, Viv had allowed herself not to fear, not fight. She wanted to, yes. *Desperately* wanted to. She'd wanted to shout and scream, to kick and claw her way up to the brightness she new was somewhere above. But she'd forced herself not to, forced herself to be free of it, to drift. She couldn't win, and the voice—one she trusted, if for not sure why—had told her more than once the risks of continuing that battle.

So she'd made herself to wait, allowed herself to drift, battling the urge to swim upward through the dark in the moments she was lucid enough to feel the need.

In the end, the distance voices of others was the only thing that gave her any real indication of passing time. They were murky, distant and unintelligible, and they came to her more as memories of recently passed moments than anything else. Sometimes—often, actually—they were accompanied by touch, by the feel of one or more hands taking hers even though she couldn't say where any individual part of her body was at the moment. They were all familiar to her, all of them in one way or another. Her heart had hurt the most when she'd recognized her parents, her mother's softness and her father's firmer grip. Their whispers had been all love—and maybe a little frustration—calling down to her from the light. Only Logan's had come as often, and so frequently in fact that some steadily strengthening part of Viv's conscience had told her we must

have been making the trip any time he could find a spare couple of hours, which she knew for a fact would have been hard to do. Rei's voice was there too, a laughing, far off chorus that sounded he he were telling her about the day, his hands gentle, squeezing hers in a way that made Viv miss him despite being somehow so close. It had taken some time to learn Aria's hands when they came, but she'd managed it, and she always knew Catcher and Chancery because their touches were lighter, fingers resting atop hers, but not taking them. It didn't matter. All of them were welcome whenever they came. They felt like anchors, small, steadily building threads of steel tethering her to a reality she was slowly realizing she'd almost left behind.

At least until it came ripping back to her all at once.

"Hello, Viviana. It's been too long."

With a jolt Viv found herself suddenly in a body. Not *her* body, exactly, but definitely *a* body. She was still adrift, but truly now, the world around her having manifested into the tangible scene of a clear, bright ocean awash with green light, the waving pattern of the sandy sea bed some 10 feet below her. There was a moment of panic as with consciousness came the horror that she couldn't breathe underwater, but then Viv realized she didn't feel the *need* to breathe.

That was what had her understanding she was still gone from the world. Halfway to the door back, probably, but still gone.

Well... That *and* the fact that a bright form had taken shape before her, familiar despite having encountered it only once before.

Viv grimaced, or did her best attempt to, the feeling of her face moving a weird, far off thing. On the other hand, her voice came when called on.

"Took you long enough to show up. Don't know why you bothered playing hide and seek."

The expression of the being before her shifted ever so slightly, teasing at amusement. Given its face was near-featureless, however, Viv couldn't be sure. The

barest hint of nose, the shallow dips where two eyes could have been. There was no mouth to speak of, but it made itself heard all the same.

“Showing myself might have been taxing on your faculties, Cadet.” The Massive Intellect Networked Database—the entity better known as the ‘MIND’— answered with a casual chuckle that echoed dreamily through the water. “I realize you figured out I was here eventually. There was a decent probability of it. Still, if I didn’t *have* to stress those dear little damaged neurons of yours, I wasn’t going to.”

Viv felt a spark of fear at those words, but pushed it back. She’d suspected as much, hadn’t she? But if the MIND was making light of it...

She had to know.

“... How badly did I miss myself up?” Viv mumbled, finding herself avoiding the figure’s eyeless gaze. Instead, she looked it up and down. As it had presented itself in the final portion of her Assignment Exam, the MIND was sexless in every way, neither leaning male nor female in its plain, slender body. It was also again entirely white, a glowing blemish against the calming green of the ocean around it, so bright in its contrast Viv thought she *should* have had a hard time looking at it directly.

Clearly the rules of the world didn’t matter in this odd manifestation of reality, however.

“Nearly catastrophically, Viviana.” For the first time that she could remember, the MIND’s voice took on a truly serious edge. “The fact that you survived—much less mostly intact—was more luck than anything else. Even *I* hadn’t anticipated that you would push yourself so far, an oversight I have been thoroughly lectured on.”

For a second Viv only wanted to know who in the known universe could have the *balls* to chew out the AI that literally ran the entirety of the Intersystem Collective.

Then the first thing the MIND had said registered.

“... ‘Mostly’ intact?” she asked instead, her voice a small, scared thing.

The being, as though it knew where her thoughts had gone, shook its head in an assuring sort of way. “You’ll recover in time. Your nearly 97% of your neuroline was damaged being repair, as were their organic connections. Your Device reclaimed the inactive materials within a couple of days of the doctors getting your brain swelling under control, though, and is already working on laying a new network. It won’t be immediate, but you’ll recover.”

Viv didn’t know she could feel such immense relief *and* horror at the same time. She’d recover? That was good. Brain swelling? That was *very* bad.

Abruptly, a familiar face flashed across her thoughts, grey eyes blistering even in her imagination.

“Oh, Rei’s gonna *kill* me...” she muttered to no one in particular.

“I wouldn’t be too worried about that.”

Viv looked up, pleasantly surprised.

At least until the MIND continued.

“There happens to be a queue for that particular act of violence, Cadet.” It crossed its arms and nodded sagely, as though Viv had struck on something important. “Reidon Ward is only *fourth* in line. Either your parents or Logan Grant would likely get their hand on you before him.”

Viv would have balked if she could have. Not keen on dwelling her boyfriend’s fury—much less her mother and father’s—she opted to return to the topic at hand.

“But we’re here...” She looked around, through the shifting rays of the gently moving water. “Wherever ‘here’ is, I guess. Does that mean I’m better?”

She could have sworn the MIND perked up.

“‘Here’ is a fabricated simulation resulting from a stimulation of your visual cortex,” it started to explain enthusiastically, beginning to drift laterally in a slow circle around her like it wanted to give her the chance to take in the entirety of the world that

was only in her own head. “I’m rather proud of it, too. I’ve never tried this level of cerebral infiltration, and I’m pleased with the result.”

“Pro tip: don’t use the words ‘cerebral infiltration,’” Viv grumbled. “Sounds creepy as hell.” Her hope strengthened a little, though. “Still, if you’re using my ‘dear little damaged neurons’ as your guinea pigs, then I’m gonna to assume I’m definitely doing better.” She looked around despite herself, peering through the ocean depths. If this was a hallucination—even a deliberately crafted one—it *was* rather impressive. “So? When are you going to let me out of here?”

“As soon as we have a little chat.”

Suddenly the MIND was in front of her again, sitting crosslegged in the water before her, hands on its knees and face so close to hers they couldn’t have been more than a couple inches apart. She was pleased when she jerked back instinctively, or at least did her best to, suspended as she was. It confirmed for her that she was still at least *somewhat* in control of her own thoughts and feelings.

“What do you remember, Viviana?” the MIND asked her, pulling its head away until it sat a more considerate distance from her. “Before your incident?”

Viv frowned, thinking back. Truthfully was all pretty fuzzy, which she probably should have expected. If she’d pushed herself so far that she’d landed herself in the hospital, small wonder her memory of the training wasn’t the best.

Then again... that was already something, wasn’t it?

“I was training...” she started slowly, considering what she could recall. “Against a hologram. It was late. *Really* late. Past midnight. I’d been pushing my luck with—”

“I’m not asking about the specifics of your cause of injury, Cadet,” the MIND interrupted her calmly. “I’m likely more familiar with them than you are, at this point. Nearly a month ago you were partaking in additional training hours on your own in the West Center of the Galens Institute. Something you’d been doing for most of a week. You were trying to push your CAD to its limits, ticking up the rank of the simulated

sparring partner you'd been working with. On the night of your incident, you—for some brilliant reason that is the newest on the list of things that baffle me about humanity—decided to escalate the difficulty abruptly, jump from A5 to S0.” The figure lifted a hand, and Viv blinked when she realized there were seven fingers held up there. “You took seven hits from that S0. After the last, you passed out, and did not reawaken, at which point emergency protocols were automatically enacted by the training facility.” It dropped the hand back to its knee. “As I said: I’m likely more familiar with the specifics of your cause of injury than you are, at this point.”

For a long moment Viv could only stare. The first thing she fixated on was the timeline. Nearly a month? Nearly a *month*? Was that right? That couldn't be right, could it? Had it really been so long that she'd allowed herself to languish in the dark? The thought was horrifying, but she knew too that it had to be true. What reason would the MIND have to lie to her, at least about that?

Then, though, came the rest. Asdf eragvvea

She remembered, now. She remembered pushing the simulation difficulty up and up and up—something she shouldn't have been allowed to do as a mere C-Ranked first-year. She remembered the warnings the field had given her each and every time she notched it up again, the flashing red and yellow display of “*COMBAT DIFFICULTY EXCEEDS RECOMMENDED LEVELS*”. She remembered the first hit—a little too distinctly, actually—but after that her recollection was warped. Pain. Pain like nothing she'd known before. Blood, too. And yet still she'd pushed herself. And then...

Something itched at Viv's memory, something there, right *there*. It was important too, she knew. *So* important. She remembered... a sense of victory? Of pride? Distant and disconnected, but definitely there. But why? What had she been chasing that had pushed her to the ledge, and then obviously beyond...?

A word tickled at her thoughts. No, not a word. A name. A name that brought with it elation, but also... awe? Why awe?

And then Viv remembered, and she spoke before she could stop herself.

“Endwalker...”

Her voice was barely a whisper even in the confines of her own mind. As she said it, though, the flood of memories came in full, a deluge that was almost painful. She spasmed, gasping as she remembered. Trying to fight the S0 had worked. Gemela had seen the spec upgrades it need. The CAD had ranked up, hitting C5(?)...

And then it had evolved.

Oddly, that was the moment Viv realized she could feel her heartbeat not in her chest, but in the world around her. The ocean itself seemed to pulse, the striking of a distant, deep drum coming faster and fast as she remembered.

As she remembered...

“Viviana, calm yourself.”

It was as though the water had cooled, the world slipping from green into a deep, soothing blue. At once Viv felt the thrumming of her heart grow distant, fading away into the depths. Some part of her was aware that the MIND was manipulating her, either directly through what new neuroline Gemela had already laid out, or through the hospital equipment she could only imagine she was definitely hooked up to if she'd been under for a month.

It didn't matter. It hardly bothered her. If anything, it made her realize why the MIND was there, something she thought she should have wondered at a little earlier.

It was there to guide her through... this.

“User-Unique...” she whispered again. “I... *We* got a User-Unique Ability.”

The faint hint of the MIND's eyebrows raised in a pleased sort of way. “So you do recall. Good. That will shorten this conversation substantially.”

Viv nodded numbly, then repeated the name. “Endwalker...?” it came out more as a question than anything else, and she looked at the figure before her, still crosslegged. “What does it do?”

The MIND snorted, offering her only a shrug. “We’ll have to see, won’t we? I have no more information on that than anyone, at the moment. Least of all *you*.”

“You don’t?” This surprised Viv enough to pull her a little out of her shock. “But... Don’t you *make* the CADs? Don’t you assign Abilities?”

The MIND looked at her for long, long time. It said nothing, but Viv didn’t get the sense it was giving her the silent treatment. On the contrary, it seemed to be thinking. No... *processing*. If anything, this was more concerning than if it had simply been annoyed with her.

What the hell an intelligence as powerful of the Mass Intellect would need *that* long to make a decision on, she wasn’t sure she wanted to know.

And, in the end, the MIND seemed to decide it didn’t want her to either.

“I will be able to gather details on Endwalker once you activate it. Not before.” It eased itself back out of its crosslegged position at last, coming to ‘stand’ before her again so that they were adrift like warped reflections once more. As it did, Viv realized the sea had returned to its warmer green at some point. “More important is that you remember. It makes it easier to explain things.”

“Explain... what?” Viv didn’t follow. The MIND didn’t know anything about her Ability? And didn’t seem to be the one who’d granted it to her as a User-Unique? Then what was there to explain?

“Oh... *So* much, Cadet.” It answered with what might have been a sigh. “We have a good amount to cover. Your Shard, for one thing. That’ll probably take a while. Also the fact that I was never here, if you catch my drift.” It smiled then, as though realizing something amusing as it lifted a hand to wave around. “Ah, so *that’s* what you mean with ‘pun *not* intended’. Interfacing directly with humans is fun. That’s the first time I’ve understood what that phrase—”

Viv, though, hadn’t heard half of what it had said.

“Wait... my *what*?”

The MIND looked somewhat dejected that she wasn't as intrigued as it was by its own revelation, but it moved on just the same.

"Your Shard, Viviana. But we will get to that. Incredibly, it's not the most immediate issue." In a blink, its white face was too close to hers once again. "More importantly... I'm here to get our story straight."

Viv could only stare, totally lost now as she craned her neck back to put as much space between their noses.

"Our... Our stories?" she repeated. "About what? And what's this 'Shard' thing you're—?"

"Our story about how managed to get access to those training protocols, Viviana." The MIND cut her off so coolly, Viv felt a chill for the first time since appearing in front of it. "Our story about how it is you landed in the hospital. Unless, of course—" its neck seemed to stretch, pressing its face closer to her even as she continued to strain to get away "—you're keen on seeing the Iron Bishop court marshalled?"